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Rabindranath Tagore

A BIOGRAPHY

UMA DAS GUPTA

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Rabindranath Tagore

A Biography

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OXFORD
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To Ashin
who believed in
Rabindranath's Santiniketan

and to my mother
with whom I first read Rabindranath

General Editor's Note

This book is part of a series of short biographies of men and women from the late nineteenth century to the present day, who have contributed in discrete ways towards building modern India. With a non-specialist readership in mind, the biographies will provide concise, authoritative introductions to the lives and works of individuals who have had the courage to pursue their own visions and vocations—in the process, often touching the lives of many others in a positive and substantial way. These stories of outstanding lives seek to understand and appreciate achievements rather than provide a straightforward chronological retelling. We hope the biographies succeed in recapturing the topography of the past without hagiography and nostalgia.

NARAYANI GUPTA

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Even though from my childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.

Rabindranath Tagore,1916

Preface

This book has two themes woven round the life of the poet Rabindranath Tagore. The dominant theme is about a poet who was an indefatigable man of action. The secondary theme is of him as a poet and writer of many a genre: lyric, poetry, narratives, short stories, novels, and plays. I had to make a choice of emphasis between the two themes since the book is not intended to be a full-scale biography covering all aspects of Rabindranath's life equally. Given how active his life was that would have been impossible within the limits required of this series. I thought it best to examine Rabindranath's work as an educator and rural reformer because those aspects of his life are relatively unknown. We all know him as a poet, but do not think of him as a man of action. Many vague notions hover round the institution he created in rural Bengal called Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan. Having worked on a history of this institution, I thought it might be useful to bring some of that research into this biography. For perceptions about his poetry and his large *oeuvre*, I have drawn on the works of scholars who know the subject better than I do. There has been some detailed research on his personal friendships from his letters and other related papers, such as Mary Lago's work on the English painter William Rothenstein who introduced Rabindranath's work to the West called *An Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911–1941*; Ketaki Kushari Dyson's on Victoria Ocampo called *In Your Blossoming Flower-Garden: Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo*; and on his letters with the English poet, missionary, and historian Edward John Thompson, edited by me titled *A Difficult Friendship: Letters of Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore 1913–1940*. This biography contains only passing references to that aspect of Rabindranath's life.

My focus is on the concerns that featured persistently in his writings and actions. These are racial humiliation and the search for self-esteem, India's history, nationalism and internationalism, education, religion, Religion of

Man, humanism, and a *Jiban-debata* or 'Lord of life'. His letters are evidence of how he longed *only* to be a poet, but they also reveal how he could not stay away from doing something practical and constructive for his country. By his own repeated admission, the work he did for education and rural reconstruction in the twin schools of Santiniketan and Sriniketan in rural southern Bengal was very vital to him. Historians of the Swadeshi movement have analysed his work in the service of the nation as an example of 'constructive *swadeshi*'. Disillusioned with nationalist politics, he turned to his own responses to the many troubled questions of the changing times. He was convinced that there could be no real political progress until social injustices were removed. He pointed repeatedly to the sectarian elements of Indian nationalism which kept our people divided. He hoped that the Santiniketan-Sriniketan education would create a new Indian personality to show the way out of the conflict of communities. He brought a different dimension to nationality by arguing for universal humanity. He remained true to it by establishing an international centre for studying world histories and cultures called Visva-Bharati at a time when other Indians were preoccupied with questions of nationalism. It led to doubts about his 'Indianness' among his contemporaries. He had the courage to defy the idea of rejecting the world as a condition for being 'Indian'. In fact, he tried continuously to break out of the isolation imposed by British imperialism on the Indian race. He had the confidence to know that the awakening of India had to be a part of the awakening of the world.

In all his thinking and actions for his country's future, he was one of the first modern voices in our country. He was open to many influences even while being rooted solidly in his heritage. The educational institution that he persevered to build against every possible difficulty, private and public, was, in the words of a very distinguished alumnus, 'a celebration of variety'. Rabindranath tried to open the teacher's and the student's mind to a fuller life. He wrote plays and acted in them. He danced with his students and invited dancers from various parts of the country to Santiniketan. He composed songs and made community singing a part of the syllabus of the school. And he ended the middle-class exclusiveness of his teachers and pupils by encouraging their interaction with the tribal and village folk around Santiniketan. He remained worried about the survival of his educational work because he could see that there were not many takers for his ideas. I hope that this biographical sketch does some justice to the moral core of his life and that it helps to raise some critical discussion among today's young adults about his concepts and their applicability. A very small selection of his letters given in an appendix at the end should be useful.

I am indebted to Professor Rajat Kanta Ray for his comments on the first draft of this essay. I was fortunate, also, to have the comments of my friend Jayati Datta-Mitra on this draft, and the benefit of her editing. My thanks are also due to Shri Subimal Lahiri and to Shri Anath Nath Das, both formerly of the Visva-Bharati, and Sri Dilip Kumar Hazra, Acting Curator of the Rabindra-Bhavana museum and archives, for their ready help with checking references to Rabindranath's works. I must not forget to mention the two people who take such good care of us in the archives reading room at the Rabindra-Bhavana, Shri Tushar Kumar Singha and Shri Utpal Mitra.

My gratitude is due to my place of work, the Indian Statistical Institute, for the excellent research environment it provides to its scholars.

Kolkata
February, 2004

Uma Das Gupta
Indian Statistical Institute

A Note on Citations

Rabindranath's works have been cited in the text with their original Bengali titles. I have given, every time in brackets, a literal English translation of the original Bengali titles. Some of the books cited in this text are also available in their published English translations. The published translations have been given in italics in the brackets just referred to. A list of those are given separately at the end of the bibliography.

The quotations are all in English translation. Many of the translations are from Rabindranath's time, done either by him or by others, but overseen by him. If they are *not* so, the source of the translation concerned is provided directly after the translated text.

UDG

I

The Poet and His Times

> Looked at from the outside, our family appears to have accepted many foreign customs, but at its heart flames a national pride that has never flickered. The genuine regard my father had for his country he never forsook through all the vicissitudes of his life, and in his descendents it took shape as a strong patriotic feeling. Such, however, was by no means characteristic of the times of which I am writing. Our educated men were then keeping at arms' length both the language and thought of their native land.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, 1912

> It is because we have placed all our reliance on another that the failure to obtain our demands leads us to agitate so furiously. We consider this as public spirit. But it is no other than a weakness.... The only way to overcome this limitation is to feed the public spirit by voluntary work in the service of the country. We can love the country only by working for it. This has now become essential.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861 and died in 1941. He grew up in the heart of Calcutta in a colonized country. His family was located at the confluence of three cultures: the Hindu, the Islamic, and the British. They had been part of the metropolis from the early days of the English East India Company. British political power over India was established with the conquest at Plassey in 1757, a hundred years before Rabindranath was born. He came to a world when, in his words,

> ... the modern city-bred spirit of progress had just begun driving its triumphal car over the luscious green life of our ancient village community.

He remembered how his brother used to regret the loss of a 'hospi-

table' society and a 'simple faith'. The new culture of a colonial state and that of a Western-style education touched every sphere of Bengali life, from governance to personal living. It led to new enterprises in literature, art, and politics, also of social and religious reform. But the use of English as the sole language of the government excluded the majority of the population from the transformation. That was rural India. Rabindranath was later to describe it as the separation of sons and fathers.

This divided milieu led him to actively engage with his country's history. He represented the Indian past in many different ways in his narrative poems, plays, and novels, and developed an independent vision for his country's future. In developing that vision he distanced himself not only from the imperialist ideology of the nation-state but also from the narrowly sectarian Hindu view of the past that had influenced Indian nationalist thought since the late nineteenth century. He overcame his temporary inclination for Hindu revivalism to advocate a strong secular and liberal interpretation of India's history. He chose the path of education and rural work for life-long action in the service of the country.

Rabindranath was brought up in their family mansion at Jorasanko in north Calcutta built by his grandfather, 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846). The family was a world in itself combining values of the past and the present in creative ways. As Rabindranath once wrote in a letter to his wife,

> We are totally different from other Bengalis in everything—in education and culture, in language, in temperament and habit. (Translation mine)

The family lived through varied fortunes and different phases of history. Being the leading Indian merchant of his generation the 'Prince' was a fabulously rich man. A cosmopolitan and a *bon vivant*, he was proficient in Persian, Arabic, and English, and was said to have had close contacts among many classes of people in England, France, and Italy—from 'royalty to radicals'. In his own country he, along with his friend and most distinguished contemporary, the social and religious reformer Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) took a leading part in all the movements for the promotion of higher education and social welfare. Dwarkanath's son, Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), who was Rabindranath's father, was in contrast a man of the high Hindu tradition of the Upanishads who placed all his inheritance at the disposal of his father's creditors and endured a sudden reverse of fortune. The noble example of his character made him known to his countrymen as *Maharshi*, a sage, just as his father had been lovingly called a 'Prince' for his high spending and large-hearted

charities. In religion, the family was profoundly influenced by the monotheism of Rammohun Roy. Debendranath gave leadership to the Brahmo Samaj, a non-conformist movement for the reform of Hindu orthodoxy initiated by Rammohun.

The Tagores believed in a synthesis of the old and new influences. Rammohun Roy inaugurated a renaissance and left behind a common direction for change when he died in 1833. Rabindranath repeatedly acknowledged that the first source of his inspiration was Rammohun's teaching who, he wrote,

> was the first great man of our age with the comprehensiveness of mind to realize the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian cultures. He represented India in the fullness of truth based not upon rejection but on perfect comprehension. I follow him though he is practically rejected by my countrymen.

Rabindranath was thus born in the atmosphere of the advent of new ideals in Bengal, ideals

> which at the same time were old, older than all the things of which that age was proud.

The atmosphere was born of three movements—intellectual, spiritual, national—all of which were revolutionary. Debendranath represented Rammohun's movement for monotheism for which he suffered ostracism and social indignities. The family broke with the timeless Hindu social and sacerdotal laws along with all the forms of Hindu ritual and worship. In those times this was considered a drastic change in the lifestyle of a rich and aristocratic Hindu family. Dwarkanath was known to have been unhappy when his son became a Brahmo. He himself flouted the social mores by going abroad twice but did not disturb his family's religious traditions. The household was transformed only when Debendranath was initiated into the *Brahmo Dharma.* That was in 1843. Clearly, the changes that came in the second half of the nineteenth century were considerable even if one looks at just the house of the Tagores at the time of Rabindranath's birth. His brothers set a bold example by their strong advocacy of the Bengali language and its literature. In his autobiography entitled *Jibansmriti* (1912, *My Reminiscences*, 1917), Rabindranath pointed out that his brothers 'cultivated the Bengali language and literature' at a time when 'our educated men were keeping at arms' length both the language and thought of their native land'. He thus grew up in a family which had to live its own life, and which made him seek guidance for his self-expression in his own inner standard of judgment. It is therefore not surprising that Rabindranath's faith in his

own country and in a culture of universal humanity transcending all barriers of time and place, both find self-expression in his early writings during the years 1878–80.

This was the period when the national movement coincided with the neo-Hindu revival in Bengal. Although at one level Rabindranath was repelled by the obscurantism of this movement, and wrote some very satirical pieces of prose and poetry about its leaders and their politics (1882–8), there was a short-lived phase when he supported Hindu revivalism as the remedy for the cultural turmoil of his times. In that phase we find him decrying caste and ritual yet, in the same breath, trying to justify their existence. In an essay entitled *Atyukti* (1902, Superfluous), he admitted that characteristic in the following words:

> I have certain places of pilgrimage in my past; when distressed by the present day troubles, I take refuge in them.

In a much later essay called *Swadeshi Samaj* (1904, National Society), he wrote again of his hope that a revival of the Hindu *samaj* would bring unity to the country's diverse people. In his words,

> Will not Hinduism be able to bring every one of us day by day into bonds of affinity and devotion to this Bharatvarsha of ours, the abode of our gods, the hermitage of our rishis, the land of our forefathers ?

But this hope for a truly religious and benevolent Hindu society was shattered by developments in the Swadeshi movement against the Partition of Bengal (1904–5). Rabindranath threw himself heart and soul into the movement. He gave lectures, wrote articles, and composed a large number of inspiring songs about Bengal which created a patriotic fervour never known before. Right at the peak of those activities and the heat of the movement he suddenly retired to Santiniketan. There was an outbreak of communal violence within the Swadeshi movement after 1905. He was deeply distressed by the threats of disruption of a united India fanned by religious reaction, and shocked that Muslims were being attacked in the name of *swadeshi*. He withdrew from every single national committee in one single day. He wrote,

> To India has been given her race problem from the beginning of history—races ethnologically different have in this country come into close contact. This fact has been and still continues to be the most important one in our history. It is our mission to face it and prove our humanity by dealing with it in fullest truth.

He gave powerful expression to his disillusionment in the novel *Gora*, serialized during the years 1907–9 and published as a book in 1910. Gora

is portrayed as an orphan boy of Irish parents brought up by a kind Brahmin family as their own child. He grew up to be a fiercely patriotic young man and a defender of orthodox Hinduism. But when Gora discovered his foreign origins he also realized he would be rejected by orthodox Hindu society where he had invested his trust and social commitment. He woke up to that face of Hindu society which set man against man, caste against caste, religion against religion. That brought him to his senses about the need of being an Indian without caste or creed. At the end of the novel we have Gora thus saying,

> Today I am, above all, an Indian. In me there is no conflict of communities—Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Today every caste in India is my caste, the bread of everyone is my bread .... At last I have escaped from all futile efforts to adorn my country in false colours.

Writing that novel must have been an inner release for Rabindranath whereby he launched a critique of national chauvinism in his portrayal of the priggish Gora. His politics, like that of his family, had its own integrity and refused to fall in with the changing trends of Bengal's politics. The Swadeshi movement turned out to be an opportunity for him to exercise that integrity. The Hindu-Muslim problem and the clash of conflicting interests continued to trouble his mind. He did not only write a novel to express himself. After breaking with the nationalists, he began the hands-on work of educating the Hindu and Muslim tenants in his family's agricultural estates in eastern Bengal where his father had sent him as estates manager in 1890. He wrote,

> I believe that all human problems find their fundamental solution in education. I know that all the evils, almost without exception, from which my land suffers are solely owing to the utter lack of education of the people. Poverty, pestilence, communal fights and industrial backwardness make our path of life narrow and perilous owing to the meagerness of education ... . I repeat that our education is the thing we should first of all take into our hands.

He never again joined the political movement. But his friendship with Mahatma Gandhi enabled him to stay close to the political concerns about his country's future till the end of his life. On his eightieth birthday when he was critically ill, he wrote a bitter indictment of British imperialism in his last address called *Savyatar Sankat* (1941, *Crisis in Civilization*). That and some of his other works, *Galpa-salpa* (1941, Short stories in the form of fantasy), the collection of poems called *Janmadine* (1941, On my birthday), published on his last birthday, along with his last piece of autobiography *Chhelebela* (1940, *My Boyhood Days*), showed how his mind and imagination had moved closer to the common man.

In the eighty years of his life, the British Indian cultural encounter came close to a clash of civilizations. It was resolved piecemeal by adjustments at various levels of Indian life. Inevitably, because of the colonial situation, the representatives of British culture dominated the interaction. The outcome was that cultural leadership became as important as political leadership in helping Indians face the conflicting interests of the times. Rabindranath and his family contributed substantially to that leadership by making culture the basis of their service to humanity outside the political movement. They did this by articulating and nurturing the creation of a new Indian personality capable of appreciating the many currents of the Indian cultural tradition along with the liberal values of the West. As his works show, Rabindranath was himself a serious student of the Indian cultural tradition. Starting from the Upanishads, he studied the different stages in the evolution of an universal Indian culture, influenced in turn by Buddhism, classical Sanskrit literature, and the mystic tradition of the medieval saint-poets like Kabir, Nanak, and Chaitanya. Finally, he found in the West's ideas of humanism a link to his vision of India's ancient history and ideals.

The creation of an integrated Indian personality, free from the conflict of communities, was a quest for self-respect in response to the humiliation of colonial rule and the weakness of a divided people. The quest was also to find a basis of unity with the world. Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore had hoped for an equal racial partnership between India and Britain in all spheres of political, economic, and cultural activity. What they did for such a partnership in their own time was no longer possible at the end of the century. But the urge for unity was not lost on the younger generation. One of Rabindranath's contributions to contemporary culture was his restoration of the Upanishadic perception of becoming one with the whole world and making that a dominant element in the evolution of our cultural ideology. Putting it in his words,

> The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you must also find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity.

Here perhaps it would be interesting to note the contrast between the novelist Bankimchandra Chatterji and Rabindranath with regard to the sources of Indian history from which they derived their inspiration for social change. Their construction of a national ideology had, at its core, a rediscovery of their nation's history and tradition together with acknowledging influences from the West. Bankimchandra identified elements that

emphasized certain aggressive ambitions which, as subsequent history has shown, were transformed into an increasingly sectarian programme. Rabindranath, on the other hand, rediscovered still more ancient tendencies, inward and contemplative, that emphasized man's oneness and intrinsic sacredness and repudiated sectarianism altogether. His inclination to embrace the world came from the confidence of his own solid education in the mother tongue and his grounding in the Indian cultural tradition—both of which were family gifts. It was indeed poetic justice that of all the Tagore family, Rabindranath was most in need of that confidence as he worked his way to find a delicate balance between his commitments to his country and to the world. This was particularly so after his award of the Nobel prize for literature in 1913. About himself he wrote,

> I am like a migratory bird having two homes—and my home on the other side of the sea is calling me.

Rabindranath repeatedly used the metaphor of the bird with two nests, one on each side of the world, to describe his situation or, shall we say, his predicament? As his close friend, the philosopher Brajendra Nath Seal once wrote to him, 'Living in India you have taken on the task of holding up two hemispheres, East and West. This tells on your health and you cannot blame your health for it. But your mind has remained robust alright'. He went round the world many times to break out of being a mere provincial of British India. He rejected what he called the 'cult' of nationalism very firmly, and in a series of essays written during 1898–1904 he expounded the ideals of the social civilization that he regarded as the most valuable contribution of the Indian past. But he was not without contradictions. He admired the West's liberal values but felt humiliated by the British presence in India. He passionately loved his country but did not belong to its orthodoxies. He would never agree to isolating India from the stream of world-thought and progress. In the midst of an unprecedented political unrest and excitement, and against the whole force of the popular sentiment, he expounded his own views with great courage in two essays, *Satyer Abahan* (1921, 'The Call of Truth') and *Sikshar Milan* (1921, 'The Union of Cultures'). Those essays spoke of his goal to bring the West on terms of equality to the India of his striving—an India of multiple cultures, an India where the impoverished village is given education and dignity of life, an India trying to build its self-respect by uniting castes and communities under an enlightened leadership. The Santiniketan institution became his arena for experimenting with these ideas and trying to fulfill them.

It must be remembered that he grew from one position to another. He was not necessarily consistent all the time. Yet, there was a remarkable consistency in his thought-world if one examines it carefully. We know that at the very beginning he called his Santiniketan school a *Brahmacharyasram*, straight out of ancient Indian heritage. But three out of its first five teachers were Christians. That was essentially Rabindranath. The orthodox Hindu must have squirmed at the sacrilege. Typically, again, in his anxiety to support his country in those humiliating times he would find something to genuinely admire from the past but re-fashion it to suit the needs of his times. If he supported caste on occasion, he did so partly out of a deep concern for his country's social harmony and partly also to counter the alienation caused by Western-style education in India. That is why we find him decrying custom and ritual on occasion and, in the same breath, trying to justify their existence. All of those contrasting characteristics co-existed in his life, and with some reason. He alienated the orthodox as well as the radicals. Both groups called his school and university a poet's whim. The outcome was that he had to stand alone, and so he did. He left us, thus, the heritage of poetry and courage which became so precious in the building of a modern India that Jawaharlal Nehru said of him, 'I have learnt more from Rabindranath Tagore than even from Mahatma Gandhi'.

It was by no means easy for Rabindranath to find a balance between the reality that surrounded him and the constructive work he persevered to do. The orthodox and the patriots suspected every living idea that was dynamic. Arrayed against them was a younger generation of Indians who exhibited a spirit of rejection of their own inheritance from imitating their European schoolmasters. A spirit of revolt had just awakened when Rabindranath was young. This movement had leaders from his own family, his brothers, and cousins. They set out with courage to find some universal basis for change and to oppose all pride in mere borrowings. He wrote with candour about his disappointment with the earlier patriotic movement:

It was not all that long ago when we were young. Yet it seems almost that an age has gone by when we were young and our imaginations were filled with high-sounding words like mother-India. But we never really knew where to look for her. Patriotism was no more than an imported idea. We acknowledged mother-India in her ancient glory. We failed to take account of her current miseries. Our patriotism kept us engaged in pleading at foreign courts for our welfare. No good for the country has come out of our kind of pursuit. We started out as heroes, turned into beggars before the Raj, and ended up as self-centred householders counting our savings. (Translation mine)

It was only after Gandhi's arrival in the political field that he felt a ray of hope as both of them were committed to constructive work coming from within the country. He knew that the people themselves must take all risks for this work and go on doing the duties that were our birthright, even in the teeth of persecution, winning 'moral victory' at every step, even 'by failure and suffering'. He thus wrote,

We must show those who are over us that we have in ourselves the strength of moral power, the power to suffer for truth. Where we have nothing to show, we have only to beg. It would be mischievous if the gifts we wish for were granted to us at once, and I have told my countrymen, time and again, to combine for the work of creating opportunities to give vent to our spirit of self-sacrifice, and not for the purpose of begging.

A poem from the *Gitanjali*, in his own English, speaks best of his aspirations for his country.

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
> Where knowledge is free;
> Where the world has not been broken up into narrow domestic walls;
> Where the words come out from the depth of truth;
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms into perfection;
> Where the clear stream of reason
> Has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
> Where the mind is led forward
> By Thee into ever-widening thought and action
> Into that heaven of freedom, my Father,
> Let my country awake.

II

'A Man Among Men'

Having wooed and won his Muse, the man in Rabindranath, like his Arjuna in *Chitrangada*, felt the need of a wider field of activity, of a fuller life as a man among men.

Biographer Krishna Kripalani

Not unoften [*sic*] some old simple-hearted peasants come to see me to pay their respects. I am always delighted to meet them. What if I am unworthy of their homage! Their guileless devotion does them credit. Their charming simplicity and deep-hearted affection make them much bigger than I am. I feel the same kind of love for them as I have for children—with this difference: they are even more childlike. Children grow, but these aged children will never grow. The radiance of artless simplicity and meekness shines through their worn-out, decrepit bodies. The simplicity of children lacks the stout steadfastness of these hearts. If there be any undercurrent of the subconscious linking the minds of all men, then my heart's deep concern for their welfare will surely reach them and be of some good to them. But, of course, not all peasants are alike, nor is it reasonable to expect them to be so. The best is always the rarest.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1893

My thoughts on motherland which permeated my mind ever since my boyhood days have not been expressed merely in the rhythm of meters. I always tried to translate them into practice. And for this I staked everything. Not that I owned much, but whatever I possessed I devoted to this cause.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1940

Rabindranath has left us his autobiography in two books, *Chhelebela* or *My Boyhood Days* written in the last year of his life, and *Jibansmriti* or *My Reminiscences* written just after his fiftieth year. But

the books are not written as chronicles of events; they tell the story of an inner striving. Hence our question, where should we look for the essential Rabindranath in his striving? At his school and university in Santiniketan? In his effort to improve the lot of the poor peasants of his estates and his work of rural reconstruction at his university? In the *Gitanjali* poems that won him the world's highest literary prize? In his reactions to racial humiliation? In his view of Indian history? Or in his stand on nationalism and internationalism? In his concept of a Jiban debata? In his loves and sufferings and in his deepening over the deaths of his loved ones? In his large volume of paintings which engrossed him in the last years of his life, or should we find him in the endless number of songs (where he himself forecast his one chance of immortality!)? My submission is that in all of those landmarks of his life, the essential Rabindranath is there in his feelings for his fellow human beings, for men and women connected through the collective unconscious in the universal human spirit, what many commentators or scholars in the field have analysed as Rabindranath's humanism, signifying thereby a set of values with man in the centre. It helped him to make a choice between man and nation. The spiritual unity of man was more important to him than all the national ideologies put together. He turned this conviction into a cause and imagined that India would be content 'to suffer for such a great cause' because that would be 'a contribution to humanity'.

We know from his letters published in *Glimpses of Bengal* (1921) that the turning point in his love and compassion for human beings, for his free thinking and unconventional religious beliefs, came out of his early contacts with the peasants of Bengal. Life in his family's rural estates brought him into direct contact with them. The daily business of looking after the estates enabled him to see at close quarters how the majority of his countrymen lived. While suffering abject poverty, those peasants still firmly believed that God would protect them in their miseries just as God had decided their fate at birth. Born into aristocracy himself this revelation was a humbling experience. It was not pity but a feeling for their helplessness that stirred the depths of humanity in him. He became determined to raise them from that state of ignorance and moral dependence and also to work for their future by bringing an awareness about the situation into the education of the elite. In 1893 he wrote,

> The soil in which we are born is the soil of our village, the mother earth in whose lap we receive our nourishment from day to day. Our educated elite, abstracted from this primal basis, wander about in the high heaven of ideas like aimless clouds far removed from this our home. If this cloud does not dissolve into a shower of loving service, man's relation with mother-earth will never become

truly meaningful. If all our ethereal ideas float about in vaporous inanity, the seed time of the new age will have come in vain. It is not as if there is no rain but the land remains untilled. It is as if, from our vast country, stretched out like an arid waste, a thirsty cry goes forth heavenward: 'All your accumulated ideas, your wealth of knowledge arrayed in fine splendour—all this should be mine. Give to me all that is mine. Prepare me so that I may receive it all. Whatever you give will be restored to you a thousand fold'.

In yet another letter from his estates he wrote a vivid description of an incident he chanced upon from his window to show how harsh and unjust life among the village poor could be, how it did not spare a child's pain nor that of a loyal and hardworking animal. This was a graphic account of how heartfelt and direct was his empathy with their everyday struggles:

I see many things from my open window. Most of them are pleasant, but a few are downright upsetting. When I watch an ox, for example, pulling an impossible load over an impassable track, being goaded with a stick, the sight is unbearable. Only this morning I saw a woman bring her naked little boy to wash him in the stream. It is really cold here today, but she made him stand in the water while she splashed him with water. The child cried out and shivered pathetically and had a frightful cough. All of a sudden the woman slapped him so hard on the cheek I could hear the sound in my room. The child crumpled and fell, with his hands on his knees, and gave choking sounds in between coughs. Then the woman grabbed his wet and shivering body by the arm and pulled him home.

I can call this a nefarious act. The boy was really young—probably the same age as my son. To witness a scene like this is to feel a blow against my ideal of humanity … (Dutta and Robinson, eds, *Glimpses of Bengal*, 1997, p. 37)

During this period, when he was so completely absorbed by the stark reality of the life of the common people, his poetry expressed a certain mysticism which was later to become an essential part of his writing. This mysticism did not belong to a creed or a school of philosophy. It came to him with an intuitive sense of the world connecting him with both the seen and the unseen. He admitted that he could not explain its presence in his consciousness but knew somehow that it was there from his young days. It expressed itself in several of his poems of the period 1894 to 1900. One such poem called *Jiban-debata* (1896, Lord of life) has featured as a key concept in analysing his mysticism but has eluded all attempts by critics to give it some concrete context. Rabindranath himself called it a 'baffling mystery' and defined it differently for different moods. To him it felt like a power greater than himself which was using him as an instrument for an unknown purpose. In a letter of 1894 he wrote,

I am overwhelmed by this awareness of the baffling mystery within me which I can neither understand nor control. I know not where it will take me or I it, I

know not what I can do nor cannot do. I cannot see, nor am I consulted about, what surges up in my heart, what flows in my veins, what stirs in my brain, and yet I move about and keep up the pretence that I am the master of my thoughts and deeds.

He resolved the mystery when he was convinced that the divine was to be found in humanity and that humanity was forever in search of the divine. In another letter of 1927 he described his concept of Jiban-debata as,

the limited aspect of divinity which has its unique place in the individual life, in contrast to that which belongs to the universe.

He believed that man was capable of achieving the union of beauty and goodness. He raised a voice of disapproval throughout his life whenever he felt that the divinity in man was being thwarted. He renounced his knighthood in protest against the notorious Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the Punjab in 1919 when the British government fired on a group of peaceful protestors who had rallied against the Rowlatt Act. He held such acts of brutality were an insult to man, an insult to the ideal of perfection in man. He declared he was protesting not as a nationalist nor as an Indian but as a human being.

His rejection of the ugly and the cruel was trenchantly criticised by the younger Bengali poets. He was ridiculed by them as the poet of sweetness (*madhura rasa*). What they ignored was the fluctuating struggle between himself and orthodoxy, his criticism of institutional religion, his rejection of the powerful, his resolution in his love of his fellow beings. They did not take into account his troubled conscience expressed in his classic poem *Ebar phirao morey* (1894, Call me back to work), in which he reproached himself for being a poet without doing anything useful for his suffering countrymen. That became the basis of his humanism which he named a 'Religion of Man'. As Satyajit Ray wrote when making his remarkable hour-long documentary film on Rabindranath's life, '... his own gain from this intimate contact with the fundamental aspects of life, and Nature, and the influence of this contact on his life and work—are beyond measure'. It gave him his two most persistent drives in life, bringing education and joy to children and to the lowly. He proved that his concern was not merely literary and poetic. His school in Santiniketan was a very early experiment in a new education system by which he endeavoured to build up a living connection between the students of the school, who would become the future intelligentsia of the country, and the peasants rooted in the soil. His first practical moves in this field were carried out for the peasants on his family estates. The angst he felt for an

ignorant and helpless humanity became an inspiration and a drive in serving his country through constructive work.

Though Rabindranath identified himself as a poet throughout his life, he also claimed that the poet's or artist's work embraces religion. Religion, therefore, by his own admission, was most important. But this was no institutional religion nor any woolly idealism which some of his own utterances could lead us to conclude. His religion was his sense of responsibility to God and to man, as also an overwhelming feeling of God's presence in man and nature. About it he wrote,

> To me religion is too concrete a thing, though I have no right to speak about it. But if ever I have come to realise God, or if the vision of God has ever been granted to me, I must have received the vision through this world, through men, through trees and birds and beasts, the dust and the soil—I feel his touch in the sky, in the air, in water, everywhere I feel it. There are times when the whole world speaks to me.
>
> Essentially, my religion is a poet's religion … My religious life and my poetical life have followed the same mysterious line of growth. Somehow they are wedded to each other, and though their betrothal had a long period of ceremony, it was kept secret from me. Then suddenly a day came when their union was revealed to me.
>
> At that time I was living in a village. The day brought all the drifting trivialities of the commonplace. I finished my morning's work, and before going to take my bath I stood for a moment at my window overlooking a market place on the bank of a dry river bed. Suddenly I became conscious of a stirring within me. My world of experience seemed to have become lighted, and facts that were detached and dim found a great unity of meaning. The feeling that I had was like what a man, groping through a fog without knowing his destination, might feel when he suddenly discovers that he stands before his own house.

Personal experience became a touchstone for him. In that sense, it was as if the body housed the soul and the soul grew in the body through a life-force or Jiban-debata. He gradually liberated himself from all forbidding convention and yielded to every mood of nature, beauty, and pathos that touched his heart and freed his spirit. More and more, he came to admire the message of the *bauls* who were the traditional wandering singers of southern Bengal and were born without a creed. There was a baul song he often quoted. Its words were:

> That is why, brother, I became a madcap Baul.
> No master I obey, nor injunctions, canons or customs.
> Now no man-made restrictions have any hold on me,
> And I revel only in the gladness of my own welling love.
> In love there's no separation, but commingling always.
> So I rejoice in song and dance with each and all.

The idea of the humanity of our God, or alternatively the idea of the innate divinity of man, was the central feeling that found expression in his religious experiences and in his poetry. It brought him the conviction that truth is found through man, that we can never go beyond man and living-experience in whatever we know and feel. In 1901, he declared this to be the essence of his actions at the inaugural of his Santiniketan school in the following words:

> I am sure that it was this idea of the divine Humanity unconsciously working in my mind which compelled me to come out of the seclusion of my literary career and take my part in the world of practical activities.

There were different stages in the development of his humanism, but it was in Santiniketan that he first began to integrate the various strains of his feelings and thoughts towards man. His *Naibedya* (1901, Offering) poems of the time are also an illustration of that state of mind. Though devotional poems, they could not be called religious in the conventional sense of the term. They were as much prayers for people as they were prayers to God. All those early experiences were developed in his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford University in 1930 and published in the following year as *The Religion of Man* (1931). The theme he expounded there was how the infinite became defined in humanity by seeking love and co-operation. Through this sensuous experience of reality he felt he had found his own religion at last, and it was The Religion of Man. He included his conversation with Albert Einstein in 1926 at the end of the book to elucidate his realisation. Einstein had asked him: 'Truth, then, or Beauty, is not independent of Man?' Rabindranath's answer was,

> Truth is realised through man .... We individuals approach it through our own mistakes and blunders, through our accumulated experience, through our illumined consciousness....

He built his school in Santiniketan with the conviction that man could become truly human by responding creatively and sympathetically to his environment.

III

'*Constructive* Swadeshi' *and Santiniketan*

> Our endeavours after political agitation seemed to me unreal to the core and pitifully feeble in their utter helplessness.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, 1908

> I said to myself that we must seek our own inheritance and with it buy our own true place in the world .... The voice came to me in the Vedic tongue from the *ashrams*.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, 1915

> My idea, my dream, has been to create free human beings who should be surrounded by an environment of creative work.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore,1920

Rabindranath turned his full attention to the Santiniketan schoo after withdrawing from the Swadeshi movement. Amid growing perplexities of the social, educational, and political problems of his times, his mind had been turning to the past to discover in the history of India a central ideal for regulating our life and work. In a series of essays written during the years 1898–1912 he argued that the history of India had not been merely one of the rise and fall of kingdoms and of fights for political supremacy. He pointed out how historically India's endeavour had been to solve her central problem of the conflict of races, between the Aryans and non-Aryans, by social means, not political. In the essays he repeatedly admitted that India had not solved the problem but emphasized that the effort to mould an integrated society without wiping out the differences had been *central* to India's history. His vision of the meeting of humanity on the soil of India found magnificent expression in a *Gitanjali* poem of 1910 which opens with the words,

On the sacred shores of the ocean of humanity of this India, Awake my heart.

In his school, he thus set out to resurrect the best things in the Indian inheritance, but gave it an universal humanist outlook. The cadres of teachers came from all over the world. Each student was to grow through his experiences, even painful ones. There was hardly a syllabus. The courses of study were to evolve from felt needs. The fresh, open mind of the child was to be tended by a method of instruction which, while answering curiosity, also aroused the desire to know. The goal was for a synthesis of knowledge and of feeling. Also, learning by doing was emphasized. The idea had to become an act. From childhood, the emphasis on pure knowledge of the Indian inheritance was integrated with the Western bias for action. The anniversaries of great men of thought or action like the Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, Chaitanya, Rammohun Roy, and Maharshi Debendranath as the founder of the Santiniketan Ashram, were observed with prayer and discussion. This was Rabindranath's basis for an education which would enable us to find 'our own true place in the world'. This education was intended for the city-bred as well as for the village folk. It was an attempt to bring city and village close through social mingling and the exchange of knowledge and experience.

When first formulating his ideas for a new Indian education, Rabindranath was clearly responding to the 'cultural dislocation' of a colonised country. His mind was filled with what he wrote in his essay called *Tapoban* (1909, 'The Message of the Forest', 1919):

> The forest, unlike the desert or rock or sea, is living; it gives shelter and nourishment of life. In such surroundings the ancient forest-dwellers of India realised the spirit of harmony with the universe and emphasized in their minds the monistic aspects of truth. They sought the realisation of their soul through union with all.

He wrote poetically of how 'the voice in the Vedic tongue' guided him to the idea of a *Brahmacharya Ashram* or a hermitage when starting his school in Santiniketan. There he was clearly idealizing an ancient Hindu institution, even identifying with it, and attempting to restore it to life in his own times. He asked himself if the past life of India, with its Hindu ideals, could be made to flower in the modern day. He wrote with emotion about how those ancient Indian hermitages or forest schools had inspired our people to creativity. They gave birth to the Upanishads on which all the later philosophies of India had been founded. He referred to the great universities of Nalanda and Taxila which represented the monastic principles of Buddhism, and to Benaras which grew to be a great centre of learning in late antiquity. He asserted that the regeneration of his country

would have to come out of a new spirit based on the Upanishadic concept of the essential unity of man. He hoped to give life to that concept in his Santiniketan institution. In his words,

> My heart responded to that call and I became determined to do what I could to bring to the surface, for our daily use and purification, the stream of ideals that originated in the summit of our past flowing underground in the depth of India's soil, the ideals of simplicity of life, clarity of spiritual vision, purity of heart and harmony with the universe, and consciousness of the infinite personality in all creation.

Reliving ideals from the past meant that he had to find teachers who would personify the 'virtues' of that age. At the inaugural of the Santiniketan Brahmacharya Ashram on 22 December 1901, he declared that Indian education must follow the example of 'our ancestors', *amader purbapurush*. He found one such example in his friend and distinguished contemporary, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861–1907). Born in an orthodox Brahmin family, Upadhyaya was attracted to the Brahmo Samaj in his youth. Even though Cardinal Newman's works had made him a convert to the Catholic faith, he dressed in the saffron robes of a Hindu monk, so strong was his nationalist feeling. Upadhyaya's writings on Rabindranath's poetry attracted the poet's attention. He was the first to call Rabindranath a 'world poet', *biswakobi*. That was rather prophetic, considering Rabindranath was hardly even known outside of Bengal at the time. When Upadhyaya learned of his friend's plans for a Brahmacharya Ashram, he eagerly offered to help. About him Rabindranath wrote,

> Roman Catholic ascetic yet a Vedantin—spirited, fearless, self denying, learned and uncommonly influential.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya was then already running an institution in Calcutta of the kind that was known in that period as an 'Aryan' school. The school was called the Sarasvata-Ayatana in the tradition of the Vedas. Rabindranath invited him to take charge of organizing the Brahmacharya Ashram in Santiniketan. Upadhyaya accepted the responsibility and brought his disciple Rewachand with him to help in Santiniketan. Rewachand was from Sindh and also a Catholic.

The 'ideas' that were applied to an 'Aryan' school or a Brahmacharya Ashram are best given in an early description of the one in Santiniketan by Rewachand who was the master-in-charge there in 1901–2. 'The arrangements in Bolpur were extremely primitive. The ground floor was partitioned into three compartments, one of which served the masters, the second was used as a class room, and the third one could be used by

both. 'The students got up at 4.45, swept, had a swim in the pond, and dressed: the Brahmin boys in white silk, the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas in red silk, and the Vaishya lads in yellow silk : the various colours representing the various castes. Then they said their individual prayers in Sanskrit, each under a separate tree, had their breakfast which consisted of gram soaked in water and *halwa* [a sweet], and dug the ground for cultivation for about half an hour. The classes opened at 7 a.m. with a prayer in which both the masters and the pupils joined. At 10 class teaching was over, the boys had various indoor games or practiced on the harmonium or read story books, each according to his taste. At 11.30, they had their dinner, the Brahmans dining separately. At 12.30 the school reopened. There was recreation for 15 minutes at 3, and the lessons were finished exactly at 4.30. Cricket and football were over by 6.30. 'The evening prayers being done, as in the morning, the boys had lessons in music, followed by supper, and exciting games or stories; and when the clock struck 9, all the students were fast asleep.'

Rabindranath was soon to decide that a Brahmacharya Ashram was not his idea of a new and modern education. He valued some of its features such as a life of simplicity for the boys and the teachers. He also greatly valued the idea of a place like a forest or *tapoban* which, in his plan of the school, was to be a quiet rural environment surrounded by nature and away from the confines of a city. He knew that was the closest he could get to establishing an intimate community of teachers and students as in the hermitages of the past. But his ideal school had to be much more than that, specially with regard to opening up the students' minds to a relationship with the world. Almost as soon as the Brahmacharya Ashram began to function, he indicated his disapproval of the institution in the following words,

> I have no desire to magically resurrect some ancient dead thing. It is not my business to bring back the past. I want to work for something which though implicit is yet strongly current, that which is not dead and which is natural to India. The projects we start fail because we blindly try to get along without acknowledging it ... to say that it is possible to resurrect India's past but not possible to integrate another country's historical time with India's, and to attempt to implement this, is vain and leads to destruction, not to new life.

There he was fighting some real inner dilemmas. He loved his country but did not accept its orthodoxies. The growth of the school was also the growth of his life. It was his experiment in ideas to discover what would be best for the regeneration of his defeated and humiliated people. It was not meant to be a commitment to any one historical or cultural dogma.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and Rewachand both had to leave the Santiniketan school within a year of their association with it. There is no sufficient record of the exact circumstances in which they left. But there are strong suggestions in the stray evidence to indicate that they became the victims of a social or religious conservatism. Rabindranath's Brahmacharya Ashram was established in his father's Ashram and it is on record that he took his father's permission to start the school. Christianity was taboo among high caste Hindus and Debendranath was a strict disciplinarian. Rabindranath might well have been under some pressure to conform to his father's scruples when functioning from his father's Ashram. This is perhaps corroborated in a letter he wrote to a teacher who joined the Santiniketan school afterwards:

> The people here [in and around Santiniketan] knew that Upadhyaya was a Christian and they were somewhat upset by it ... Many members of my family were unhappy that the folk around here would get the wrong idea about Santiniketan. Many of the children's guardians too were uneasy that the responsibility of the children was in the hands of a Christian teacher [Rewachand]. (Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya*, 1999, p. 290)

But Rabindranath's eldest son, Rathindranath (1888–1961), provides another explanation about what went wrong with the Upadhyaya-Rewachand team which also makes sense in the context of the school's ideals. As one of the first five pupils of the Brahmacharya Ashram, Rathindranath had studied directly under Rewachand. He wrote that his father disliked the rigid rules imposed upon the pupils by Rewachand. In his memoir entitled *On the Edges of Time* Rathindranath wrote, '[Rewachand] was a Roman Catholic and a strict disciplinarian; his was the kind of discipline learnt on the cricket field and applied to everyday life. This hardly appealed to Father and clashed with the ideal of freedom and self-determination which he sought to establish in the Ashram; as a consequence, Rewachand had to leave very soon'. Rathindranath's testimony about his father's disapproval of Rewachand's rigidity makes sense when we recall that a basic objective of the poet's school was that its pupils would happily assimilate the learning given to them with as much freedom as possible. Teaching was to be given in the mother tongue for the very reason that learning in a foreign language would hinder the process of 'easy assimilation'.

The idea of happiness, the most fundamental of human emotions, was used innovatively in Santiniketan. There was a minimum of curriculum but a round-the-clock routine of varied activity which included sense-training for the students, taking long walks into the country, observing

how differently human beings lived, and collecting materials for a museum on human habitats. Rabindranath wrote songs to represent the different seasons, the coming of spring and of the rains, of the pitiless summer and of mellow autumn. These songs were sung by the school to celebrate the seasons. Activities like singing, reciting, story-telling, acting in plays and readings from world literature were most important to the school. One of the teachers had a rich knowledge of literature and there are descriptions in the school archives of how he could recite for hours from Virgil, Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, or Kalidas, as well as from Browning and Rabindranath. In the early days of the school, the boys and the teachers together staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* They regularly performed Rabindranath's plays many of which were written, as Rabindranath has himself told us in his autobiography, for the teachers and the students of Santiniketan. Once again we have pupil Rathindranath's account of how the teachers raised an alarm over the impending school 'Final' examination as the rehearsals for the plays progressed, and of how his father restrained the teachers. 'Our joy knew no bounds when Father turned a deaf ear to their importunities and the rehearsals continued merrily as before'.

The poet was convinced that education must be made a part of daily life to reach a child's mind, and not be detached from it. In his words,

> The mind is greater than education, vigour greater than information; under the weight of the printed word no energy is left in us to make use of our minds.

His idea was that children should be surrounded with the things of nature that have their own educational value. He wanted that their minds should stumble on and be surprised at everything that happens before them in their daily lives. This would lead them to ask questions and find answers about their surroundings. He attached great importance to personal self-expression. He was convinced that each person is potentially creative and that the individual's potential could surface in the 'right environment' if given the 'right incentive'. He wanted Santiniketan to nurture that individual potential and in its turn become a real home for the students, built by their love. He expected them to feel every happiness, big and small, by being given 'a full life' so that their minds were prepared to receive education in its 'richness' and not merely to acquire and hoard isolated bits of information. Thus he wrote,

> I allowed them to live a complete life. They had perfect freedom to do what they wished, with as much liberty as was possible for me to give them ... They knew when I was writing a drama, and they took an intense interest as it went on and developed, and in the process of their rehearsals they acquired a real taste for

literature, more than they could through formal lessons in grammar and class-teaching. And this was my method. I knew the children's mind. Their subconscious mind is more active than the conscious one and therefore the important thing is to surround them with all kinds of activities which could stimulate their minds and gradually arouse their interest.

The other very important idea in the school was freedom. Like the idea of happiness, the idea of freedom was also used creatively in the Santiniketan education. The students were encouraged to take decisions on matters concerning their lives. For example, even after the days of the Brahmacharya Ashram were over, customary orthodoxies such as the 'brahmin-line' at meal times continued in the school if the students asked for it. The boys came from all castes and were told at the time of their admission that they were free to either observe the caste rules or not to. About this Rabindranath told a visitor in 1927,

'Of course I could not force them to since freedom is the very principle of the school.

'But', he added, 'it was not long before one by one they came and asked to be allowed to eat with the majority'.

Perhaps his purpose was to expose the student to the divisive customs from the past since the problem *did* exist and could not be wished away so easily. His hope was to cleanse the student's heart of a slavish submission to orthodoxy. He believed that an open and happy education from a young age, in an environment of being with 'others' from early on in life, would cure society of division and strife. On this he wrote,

It is difficult to get rid of these prejudices after we grow up. It is often sedulously cultivated in our school text-books, and also by the patriots who wish the boys to be proud of their own country by running down other countries.

He described the Santiniketan school as 'an indigenous attempt in adapting modern methods of education in a truly Indian cultural environment'. The idea in itself was a protest against the 'soulless' universities introduced by the alien rulers. They were 'soulless' because they were not a growth from the soil. They were imposed by 'foreign hands'. At the same time there was no denying that Western education had brought a 'new life' to the upper classes of the Indian society enabling them to identify resources from the past and to build on them a new literature, new art, new music, a new philosophy, and also modern science. The existing modern universities were also aware of those new life forces. They had even begun to do some grafting in that direction. Calcutta University, for example, had introduced the study of the Bengali language

and literature. But these were 'half-measures', wrote Rabindranath. The Santiniketan experiment was an endeavour to do more.

Reaching out to a larger humanity was essential to that endeavour. The Santiniketan Ashram was surrounded by villages. Students were sent regularly to learn about the conditions of the villagers. This was considered important for educational value and also as the way to begin a relationship with the villages. He was convinced that an Indian education would be incomplete without knowledge of the village, and without inculcating a moral responsibility among the educated for the survival of the villages. Majority of the Indians lived in the villages yet they were kept out of the mainstream of Indian life. Colonial education did not reach the farmer, the oil grinder, the potter. In other nations education was intimately associated with the life of the people, Rabindranath wrote, but not so in ours. Modern education in India was designed to produce clerks, lawyers, doctors, magistrates, *munsiffs*, and policemen. This new elite was indifferent to the rest of their countrymen whom they regarded as *chhotolok*, literally small people. Rabindranath was determined to change this by creating a new education which would apply economics, agriculture, healthcare, and other everyday sciences to the villages. Then, and only then could the new education become the centre of the country's way of living. He wrote,

> The villages are the cradles of life and if we do not give them what is due to them, then we commit suicide. Modern civilization is depriving the villages of life-stuff, and draining away everything from the villages to the pampered towns. To counteract this I have brought my students around to this village work which we have started in order to give them the proper training for helping the villagers. I think this is, in short, the idea which I have in mind in my school.

The idea was developed to become his pioneering Sriniketan experiment of rural reconstruction. He called upon the villagers to come forward to co-operate in the effort, 'as partners, not as beggars'.

Rabindranath believed that all human problems such as poverty, religious discord, and disunity would find their resolution in education. He had to take many a disappointment. Explaining why he had to establish a separate school for the village boys in Sriniketan instead of admitting them to the existing one at Santiniketan, he wrote how those students who came to Santiniketan from 'comparatively rich families' wanted only to pass examinations and get degrees simply to earn their livelihood. They considered manual training of any description a 'waste' of time, as also cultural training in music and art. It was not possible, therefore, to give them a 'new' education. He had to tolerate their resistance as otherwise,

he wrote, there would not be a single student left in his school. A feasible alternative was to start a 'parallel' school for the villagers who were not at the time ambitious for commercial or government offices. He realised that the lessons of the 'modern' school and the tendencies of his times were 'aggressively antagonistic' to his ideas for a new education. He analysed his predicament accurately when he wrote in 1926,

It is not possible to go too much against the current of the times. If we have an arrangement in one place which has nothing corresponding to it then that is a loss, it cannot survive. That is why this school is now much different from what it used to be before. (Translation mine)

IV

Santiniketan, 1863–1941

The growth of this school was the growth of my life and not that of a mere carrying out of any doctrine.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1925

We have come to this world, to accept it and not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1926

Rabindranath's Santiniketan school is now the 'school department' of Visva-Bharati, a Central University of the Government of India, where many of the original ideals have disappeared. It is financially well-endowed as the nation's memorial to Rabindranath Tagore. Having come under the University Grants Commission, Visva-Bharati is now a degree-giving university. That is its most crucial break with the past. Rabindranath never allowed degrees to be given in his beloved institution. He suffered when, on the students' demand, the Santiniketan College established in 1918 had to be affiliated to the University of Calcutta in 1926. But he did not compromise as far as to give degrees from Santiniketan. Instead, in response to the student demand, provision was made from that year to *also* teach Calcutta University's courses so that the students opting for Calcutta University's Bachelor of Arts degrees while studying at Santiniketan could be examined by Calcutta University. The other break with the past today has been that no effort was made to develop advanced research in comparative religions and cultures. That would have been in continuity with its traditions.

Rabindranath founded the Santiniketan school in his father's Ashram in 1901. The Ashram had been started way back in 1863 when Debendranath

Tagore bought twenty *bighas* of land from the Raipur estates in the southern Bengal district of Birbhum. He built a guest house on that land and called it 'Santiniketan', and the place came to be called by the same name. It became an Ashram by a Deed of Trust in 1888 to enable householders from all religions and backgrounds to spend time in prayer and meditation away from their domestic responsibilities. Debendranath endowed the Ashram with one of his landed properties yielding an annual income of Rs 1800 for the Ashram's maintenance. The Deed of Trust included the provision for establishing a school and for holding an annual fair where the villagers could sell their produce. In 1901, Rabindranath obtained his father's permission to start a school in the Ashram as the first step in implementing his idea of a new Indian education. There is an early description of Santiniketan which he wrote when he first went to stay there.

At its southern extremity were rows of tall *sal* trees. There was a *madhobi* creeper over the gate. Behind, in the east, was the mango grove. In the west were some palm trees, some *jam* and some *jhau*, set off by scattered clusters of coconut. In the northwestern corner was a simple marble seat underneath those ancient *chhatim* trees. There were no trees in front of it. There were only open fields stretching to the horizon. Those fields were yet uncultivated. In the north was the two-storied guest house in a grove of *amloki*. Adjoining the guest house was a kitchen in the shade of some ancient *kadom* trees. There was one other brick-structure, a one-storied brick building. This was the library … . Outside the *Ashram*, to its south, was a tank, then large and full of water. And to its north, on its high banks, a very old row of palm. All this was clearly visible from the *Ashram*. A shadeless red-earth road led to Bolpur along the eastern edge of the *Ashram*. Few used that road as the town was still uncrowded with only a small number of houses in it. The rice mills had not yet started to darken the skies with their smoke or to poison our food. There was total rest and quiet everywhere … In this quiet and sparsely populated garden of *sal* trees I started, with the help of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, and with a handful of boys, a school for children. I used to teach underneath an old *jam* tree.

Santiniketan was located within two miles of the Bolpur railway station on the East Indian Railway Line. It was about a hundred miles northwest of Calcutta. The school had the advantage of being situated in the heart of nature but not too far from a big city. There would be the influence of the trees, the open fields, and the seasons changing so dramatically under a very wide sky. At the same time the city would be near enough to provide science teachers, libraries, and technical equipment. Started in 1901 with five boys and five teachers, the school was called the Brahmacharya Ashram. After the first year the name was changed to

Brahmavidyalaya. After almost a decade a girls' school was added in 1908. But that did not survive for more than a year. A secret romance led to the tragic suicide of a school student. There were not enough people in the institution to handle such problems. Very sad to have to send the girls back home, Rabindranath remembered his wife when he said to the girls at the time of their leaving,

This would not have happened if your *Ashram* mother was alive to look after you all. (Translation mine)

His wife Mrinalini Devi died in 1902—within a year of the school's existence. Admissions to girls from outside the Ashram community had to be halted and postponed till a separate section for girls was organized much later in 1922. In the Santiniketan education, girl and boy students were given the same courses to study but there was a difference in certain assigned activities. The boys were given training in road and house repairs from which the girls were exempted. The girls were given the special responsibility of looking after the younger boys in the children's section and also of attending to sick children. The school administration was simple and democratic, and students were given self-governing powers in the organization of the school's day to day working. The boys constituted themselves into courts for the punishment of small offences. It was administered as 'a republic of the boys'. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Santiniketan on his return permanently from South Africa in 1915, he guided the students to do every bit of the menial work themselves, cooking and washing up, buying the stores, and cleaning the toilets. Rabindranath told the Santiniketan community that this was the right way to *swaraj*. He and Gandhi were meeting each other for the first time. Santiniketan remembers Gandhi's visit on 10 March every year as the day when the students clean their dormitories and classrooms themselves. The day is marked as 'Gandhi Punyaha' on the annual school calendar.

Rabindranath gave to Santiniketan not only its ideal but also the greater part of its financial support. Santiniketan had no income of its own besides the annual maintenance grant of Rs 1800 from the Santiniketan Trust established by his father. To start the school, he had to sell almost everything he possessed including his wife's jewellery, his gold watch and chain, which was a wedding gift, and his seaside bungalow at Puri. His personal income at this time was about Rs 200 a month from the family estates. For some years at the outset, in keeping with the school's ideals, the students were not charged tuition fees. Financial difficulties increased over time and the struggle to make ends meet continued to the end of his days. He had to borrow money from his friend Loken Palit's father, Sir

Tarak Nath Palit, which he was unable to repay during Sir Tarak's lifetime. His debt was transferred to the University of Calcutta when Sir Tarak died leaving all his property to that University.

He had constantly to go on 'begging' missions in India and the West to raise funds for his institution. Those missions were not all that successful either. His lecture tour in the USA in 1916–17 brought him recognition but failed to produce the expected financial returns. The agency which was handling the tour went bankrupt towards the end of the tour and all that Rabindranath could realise from the agent was a few thousand rupees. But that money at least enabled him to repay his debt to Calcutta University. His second lecture tour of America in 1920–1 also failed to raise any significant amount for Visva-Bharati. The need for funds continued. In 1935, he once wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru on this subject,

> Every winter Visvabharati rudely reminds me of the scantiness of her means, for that is the reason when I have to stir myself to go out for gathering funds. It is a hateful trial for me—this begging business either in the guise of entertaining people or appealing to the generosity of those who are by no means generous. I try to exult in a sense of martyrdom accepting the thorny crown of humiliation and futility without complaining. Should I not keep in mind for my consolation what you are going through yourself for the cause which is dearer to you than your life and your personal freedom?

Rathindranath's memoir records how difficult it was for his father to undertake those fund-raising trips. He wrote: 'Although compelled to seek help for his institution, the idea of begging money from moneyed men, just the people who were least capable of appreciating him and his work at Santiniketan, was painful to father. He would shrivel up when it actually came to the point where he would be expected to make the request.' Rathindranath went on to recall an incident where he and his father once met the Gaekwad of Baroda to ask him for an endowment worthy of a Prince. A friend of the Santiniketan school who was a businessman of Bombay arranged for this meeting and prepared the ground with the Gaekwad. But it was left to Rabindranath to formally bring up the matter at their meeting. He did it, but he wound up his appeal for the funding by saying to the Gaekwad that if he did decide to give any money, he should give it as if he were throwing it into the water. Not surprisingly, the money did not materialise.

Over the years Rabindranath found a surer and less onerous way of generating funds. He did it by touring the country with performances of his dance-dramas by Santiniketan students. From 1930, a regular income of around Rs 30,000 came from that source and listed under 'Proceeds

of Performances' in Visva-Bharati's account books. With advancing age these tours naturally became difficult for him. Once Gandhi found him touring in frail health. This was in 1936 when he had taken the Santiniketan troupe to stage his dance-drama *Chitrangada* in Delhi. Gandhi asked him what the deficit was that was worrying him, and gave him a cheque for that amount with a promise that he was never again to go out on such a mission. Though the money was a windfall, it brought its share of frustration too. Rabindranath chafed at his promise because it deprived him of the pleasure of witnessing how his creations took shape in melody and movement. In fact, he even wrote a hurt letter to Gandhi accusing him of not appreciating the worth of those cultural activities for the life of the nation. Gandhi wrote back immediately with an apology. Rabindranath was absolved from his promise. He continued to travel with his troupe and enjoy participating in his own creations.

Santiniketan became central to his life. The pleasure that he felt in his creations, the optimism and the determination with which he gave life to his ideas, were more than half his battle won. He could not have done it otherwise. The misfortunes that came his way were many. Financial worries were the least of them. His wife's death in 1902 and the death of three of his children, and of two of the very young and dependable teachers of the Santiniketan school, all within a decade of starting the school, would have been ample ground to not continue with it. There were other serious problems with running the school. People looked down on the institution and did not appreciate his innovative ideas in education. He had difficulty even in getting pupils when the school was first established; those who were brought were mostly 'difficult' children. It took years before the school was recognised as anything but a reformatory out there 'in the fields of Bolpur'. In addition, the British Government was suspicious of the school's objectives and issued secret circulars warning its officials against sending their children there. Rabindranath, therefore, had every reason to abandon the experiment, but it was just the reverse. He continued to struggle with a sense of fulfillment.

Santiniketan, in his words, was a 'sapling' which was to grow into Visva-Bharati, a 'widely-branching tree'. The thought that the Santiniketan school was meant to grow into something fundamentally broader was there from the beginning of the institution's existence. The first foreign student to come to the Santiniketan school as early as in 1902 was Hori San from Japan. He was sent by the philosopher Kakuzo Okakura who was a friend of the Tagore family and an activist for Asian unity. This had so delighted Rabindranath that, between him and his friend the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, they thought of a project for Hori San to copy

the lost Buddhist texts in Sanskrit from the temples of China and Japan and bring them to the Indian libraries. The emphasis on Indian cultures came with an urge to explore a wider historical connection with the far East. With time and expanding resources this branch of study was actually developed in the Santiniketan institution with the study of Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese cultures. The idea was taken further after Rabindranath was awarded the Nobel prize in 1913. From then on, his travels in the West convinced him of the need for worldwide co-operation and he naturally hoped that Santiniketan would become the fittest place for a meeting of the scholars of the East and the West.

This was the vision of the universal in Rabindranath, universal in his interpretation of India's history and culture as well as in his goal of building a bridge between nations. He knew that if Santiniketan was to become truly the 'guest house of India' that he wished it to be, then it had to become broader in its learning and its understanding of history. In his essay called *East and West* (1908), he argued that the history of India is not the history of Aryans or non-Aryans, it is not the history of the Hindus, nor the history of Hindus and Muslims taken together. He compared the civilization of the West with its exclusiveness to the civilization of India nurtured on human relationships and co-operation. On that note began his preparations for adding a Centre of Indian Culture at Santiniketan in 1918. This was to be a centre for the coordinated study of the various cultural streams of India, Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, and Zoroastrian, through philosophy, literature, art, and music. He wrote,

> The *Ashram*, with its *vidyalaya*, had now advanced to the point where it could begin to reach out further towards the ideal of a comprehensive Indian culture. The attempt had to be made, side by side with the education of the younger boys, to encourage advanced study in every branch of serious learning which had grown and spread in India itself … Contact at a common centre should lead to mutual understanding and appreciation and knit together the spiritual ties of unity. The treasures which these different religious cultures contained, should be brought into practical use in relation to the modern world, not held apart and miserly hoarded.

Step by step Santiniketan moved from being a collection of separate educational experiments into a well-knit whole—a school, a college, a department of higher studies and research, a centre of art and music. Within two miles of these there was also the institute of rural reconstruction at Sriniketan about which Rabindranath wrote,

> It must cultivate land, breed cattle, feed itself and its students; it must produce all necessaries, devising the best means and using the best materials, calling science to

completeness' with 'music and readings from the epics' as in the 'past'. He declared he would be content even if that could be done realistically only in 'one or two villages'. The outcome could then serve as an ideal for the whole country. Then, and only then, could the new education become the centre of the country's way of living. He wrote,

> I endeavoured all the time I was in the country to get to know it down to the smallest detail. The needs of my work took me on long distances from village to village, from Shelidah to Patisar, by rivers, large and small, and across *beels* and in this way I saw all sides of village life. I was filled with eagerness to understand the villagers daily routine and the varied pageant of their lives. I, the town-bred, had been received into the lap of rural loveliness and I began joyfully to satisfy my curiosity. Gradually the sorrow and poverty of the villagers became clear to me, and I began to grow restless to do something about it. It seemed to me a very shameful thing that I should spend my days as a landlord, concerned only with money-making and engrossed with my own profit and loss.

He wanted to organise the villages so that they could supply all their needs on a cooperative basis. He believed that given education they could establish and maintain their own schools and granaries, banks and cooperative stores. He hoped that those ties of co-operation would bring unity to the people and free them from dependence on the State. That was the change he sought to bring to the Indian village. By change he meant, most of all, a change of attitude. He wrote,

> It is not enough to try to remove wants; you can never remove them completely from outside; the far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants.

If we take the goal of self-reliance as a basic premise in Rabindranath's scheme of rural reconstruction, it would be easier for us to place the Sriniketan experiment in the context of the nationalist and economic thinking of its day. While the Indian National Congress was also concerned about the poverty of rural India, there was a difference over the remedy. The Permanent Settlement had created a class which had the right to a share in the produce of the land even without taking part in the productive process. When the government realised these implications it introduced legislation to protect the tenants, but once the trend of avoiding direct cultivation was set in motion there was no going back. The tenants soon found it more profitable to rent out their holdings to sub-tenants, or sometimes even to newcomers who did not know agriculture, and to go into the professions. The collection of rents from every layer was so structured that quite a substantial portion of the produce could be reserved for those who performed no agricultural labour. The result was

V

Sriniketan, 1922–41

> In my estate the river was far away and lack of water was a serious problem. I said to my tenants, 'if you dig a well, I shall get it cemented'. They replied, 'you want to fry the fish in the oil of the fish itself. If you dig a well you will go to heaven through the accumulated virtue of having provided water for the thirsty, while we shall have done the work'. The idea, obviously, was that an account of all such deeds was kept in heaven and while I, having earned great merit, could go to the seventh heaven, the village people would simply get some water.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

> We have started in India, in connection with our Visva-Bharati, the work of village reconstruction. Its mission is to retard the process of racial suicide.
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, 1928

Visva-Bharati's institute of rural reconstruction called Sriniketan continues till date but it is no longer an experiment, no longer innovative. It was pioneering in its time as the culmination of a long period of persistent endeavour by Rabindranath in bringing the city and the village close to each other. We have noted that the idea of doing something to redeem the neglected village came to him when he first went to live in his family's agricultural estates of East Bengal. The experience played a seminal part in turning him into a humanist and a man of action. The closer he felt to the masses of his society the further he moved from his own class who were indifferent to the masses. His independent thinking gave him the courage of conviction to work alone. He knew there was not a lot he could do on his own, given his meagre resources and the enormity of the need. But he was determined at least to establish an ideal with the work. He had two objectives in his village work, to educate the villager in self-reliance and to bring back to the villages 'life in its

completeness' with 'music and readings from the epics' as in the 'past'. He declared he would be content even if that could be done realistically only in 'one or two villages'. The outcome could then serve as an ideal for the whole country. Then, and only then, could the new education become the centre of the country's way of living. He wrote,

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that the actual cultivator was left with an unpaid initial debt to the money-lender which kept accumulating. To overcome this, the direct cultivator had to sell a large amount of his produce 'under distress', notwithstanding his own need. For most peasants this cycle meant mounting indebtedness over time as well as the transfer of peasant holdings on a considerable scale.

Rabindranath knew how desperate the land problem was. Those conditions are fully echoed in his writings. He formulated his thoughts on the subject in his essay called *Rayat-er Katha* (1926, About the Peasant). There he argued that the Bengal peasant could not be made into a 'peasant proprietor' as long as land was a marketable commodity. The competition for land would lead to more land transfers and sales. The peasant would not be left with enough land for even his domestic needs. He warned that such a situation would inevitably lead to violence and added he had come across that kind of revolutionary literature in the countryside. But he could not be persuaded to agree that a change in property relations would solve the problem. He pinned his hope on human attitudes. He seemed certain, for example, that the landlord, as a class, could not be prevented from extracting rent but could be persuaded to take 'moral' responsibility for the welfare of his tenants and protect them from the extortionists. He thus wrote,

> How can the manhood of the country be restored, if our people remain easy victims for the money-lender, the police, the revenue officer and the clerk of the law court?

He held firmly that the right to land should belong 'morally' to the peasant as the 'natural' tiller of the soil. He also suggested that land should be 'collectively' cultivated by co-operative methods but there is no evidence that he implemented collective farming in his estates or in the villages under Sriniketan.

Rabindranath was critical of the fact that the Indian National Congress had no constructive programme. All they wanted was that their grievances be redressed by the authorities. Their demands were mainly for a larger representation for themselves in the Council House and in Municipal Government. Put in Rabindranath's words,

> They wanted scraps of things, but they had no constructive ideal. Therefore I had no enthusiasm for their methods. It was my conviction that what India needed most was constructive work coming from within herself.

He personally felt that need from within to start the constructive work even if that meant starting with only one or two villages and liberating

them from 'the shackles of ignorance and helplessness'. As early as 1910 he wrote to Rathindranath who was then being groomed for the village work,

> I was one of the principal organisers of the National Fund and now I feel conscience-stricken about it. Whenever something big was planned from the outset the country became excited with hope, but then followed, almost inevitably, the phase of disillusionment and disgrace. Now I fully realise how utterly futile are such endeavours .... A deep despair now pervades rural life all over our country, so much so that high-sounding phrases like home rule, autonomy etc appear to me almost ridiculous and I feel ashamed even to utter them.

By 1910, when he wrote that letter to Rathindranath, he had come to the conclusion that working for a 'national' programme was useless so long as the educated elite in India were divided, so long as there was a conflict of vested interests among them. But he also knew that there was a widespread sensitivity to nation-building among the general populace. His experience of the National Fund was a case in point where he saw for a fact that a hefty sum had been collected in one single day despite the low incomes of the donors themselves. That is why he said in his address to the Pabna Provincial Conference of Bengal in 1908,

> The people of the land are anxious to give and to work. They want to know to whom to give and what. (Translation mine)

He suggested that bands of educated volunteers should be organised who would willingly dedicate themselves to working in the villages without publicity or loud announcements. Their job would be to enlist the co-operation of the villagers to start the work of constructing roads, schools, water reservoirs, sanitation, to improve agricultural production, also to create new folk music and bring a new objective to village life.

In 1906, Rabindranath enlisted his son and son-in-law and a friend's son as the first 'volunteers' and sent all three of them to the University of Illinois at Urbana in America to study agriculture and dairy farming as part of the larger plan to prepare them for the future of rural reconstruction. In 1912, he bought twenty *bighas* of land with a house which stood on that plot of land just outside a village called Surul, two miles west of Santiniketan. This place was afterwards named Sriniketan. The jungles surrounding the place were cleared to start on the reconstruction programme. In the meanwhile the three 'enlisted' volunteers who were sent to Illinois had returned with their agricultural training. They were asked to get the work started at the new place but they came down with malaria. In the second attempt, a teacher from Santiniketan was sent to

stay there and get to know the villagers. But neither of those attempts could be sustained. Rabindranath finally picked upon an Englishman called Leonard Elmhirst who was then a student of agriculture at Cornell University in America and interested in voluntary work in India. He had heard about Elmhirst from another Englishman called Sam Higginbotham who was doing experimental work at the Pusa Agricultural Institute in India at that time. Rabindranath met Elmhirst in 1921 in America. On their meeting he said to Elmhirst,

I have established an educational enterprise in India which is almost wholly academic. It is situated well in the countryside of West Bengal at Santiniketan. We are surrounded by villages, Hindu Muslim and Santal. Except that we employ a number of these village folk for various menial tasks in my school, we have no intimate contact with them at all inside their own communities. For some reason these villages appear to be in a state of steady decline. In fact they are all in decay. Some years ago I bought from the Sinha family a farm just outside the village of Surul, a little over a mile from my school. I hear that you might be interested in going to live and work on such a farm in order to find out more clearly the causes of this decay.

Early in 1922, Elmhirst with his team of two teachers and ten students from Santiniketan took up village reconstruction work in three designated villages. His diaries entitled *Poet and Plowman* are the main source of information for those beginnings. At first Elmhirst thought that '[his] newly gained knowledge of agricultural science from the USA would be the most useful' tool in dealing with the declining condition of the countryside. But he was soon to find that Rabindranath's approach of looking at the villager's problems 'as a whole' was more helpful to the work. For example, Elmhirst and his team learnt directly that it was through offering healthcare facilities that the affection of the villagers was most readily won. They taught themselves to give first-aid and build up a medicine chest for the purpose. It was proving difficult to get a city-educated doctor who was willing to live in the villages and serve the villagers. Therefore, Elmhirst arranged through his Quaker friends in America to send a paramedic-cum-nurse called Gretchen Green to start a clinic in Sriniketan in 1922. Later the Quakers also lent the services of the malaria expert Dr. Harry Timbres who, with his wife, came from America for three years to set up a programme of malaria control in Sriniketan's villages. Governmental organisations like the District Board and the Union Board were already attending to the problem of eradicating malaria in the villages. While the Sriniketan team worked closely with those government bodies in the area, they independently also approached the villages with their own 'comprehensive' plan of rural reconstruction.

The 'comprehensive' plan of rural reconstruction was laid out under the heads of 'health', 'education', 'economic improvement', 'social work', and implemented with guidance from the Sriniketan 'centre'. The Sriniketan 'centre' was made up of a number of demonstration units where economists, agriculturists, social workers, doctors, midwives, and specialists in various fields of rural industry and education worked on the problems brought to them by the villagers. The idea was to put their heads together on different aspects of rural life. Social work, for example, consisted of holding weekly meetings with the village priest and the mullah, where readings from spiritual texts were arranged for adults, festivals were celebrated, community singing with *kirtans* and *bhajans*, as well as performing *jatras* or drama were organized, as well as the repairing of temples and mosques. Work in connection with untouchability was taken up after Mahatma Gandhi's epic fast in September 1932 with Rabindranath presiding over the movement in the area. Economic improvement was sought by setting up co-operatives and developing cottage industries. Two enterprises under that scheme deserve special mention. One was a project 'to improve the economic condition of the villages by increasing the number of weavers, organising them into a co-operative and also by giving further training to the existing weavers'. A substantial weaver's co-operative was successfully established during 1933–5 and was the first of its kind. The other project was 'to give training in shoe-making in one selected village (to start with) and establishing a cooperative of shoe-makers with a view to improving their economic condition'. Both the projects got well under way with the long-term goal of making them independent of Sriniketan. Improvements in agriculture formed the other important part of the economic programme. The farm, with about fifty bighas of land and a large tank for irrigation, grew new vegetables and fibre crops as well as fruits. Experiments were started to increase the productivity of the main crop to relieve the poverty of the villagers. This was done by introducing new crops in rotation along with the use of tractors and fertilizers for the first time.

The work done in Ballavpur was a typical sample of Sriniketan's 'comprehensive' scheme of rural reconstruction. Situated four miles from Santiniketan, the village of Ballavpur had been devastated by malaria. Work was taken up there as a single village unit in 1926 with the co-operation of the neighbouring villages. A village worker was sent from the Sriniketan 'centre' to live in Ballavpur and join the villagers in their work rather than supervise matters from afar. A thorough survey was at first conducted to find out about the specific needs in sanitation, medicine, vaccination, maternity work, prevention of snake-bite, education,

arbitration, banking, gardening, poultry farming, weaving, tanning, and social work. The Visva-Bharati Cooperative Bank, established with Rabindranath's Nobel prize money, gave loans to the cultivators to pay off their arrears to the landlords. Sriniketan in fact changed the look of Ballavpur. Impressed with the results, the local *zamindar* of the area donated a bigha of rent-free land to Sriniketan to put up a building for the Ballavpur Rural Reconstruction Society.

Yet, with all of Rabindranath's will and effort, it cannot be said that the Sriniketan experiment made a substantial difference to village India. The overall picture of late nineteenth-century Indian society was such that peasants still adhered to their traditions without exposure to anything else while the educated sections held them in contempt. Rabindranath knew from direct experience that none of those who dominated the political scene in his country felt that the villagers 'belonged' to their country. They knew well that recognizing this vast multitude as their 'own people' would force them to accept responsibility for them and to begin the 'real work'. They were not even interested. That was where Rabindranath valued the Sriniketan effort most of all, that it built at least a relationship with the village. That meant more to him than the measure of success or failure over agricultural productivity or healthcare. He wrote,

> The valuable gift of sympathy in some of our humble workers has worked a miracle which must not be contemptuously mentioned because it has not been measured and not accurately recorded.

For a brief period Sriniketan blossomed into an inspiring environment with idealists from all over the world joining hands with our people in bringing hope and action to their lives—just what the founder of Visva-Bharati worked for. For this, he appealed for help to all. He once told a group of writers visiting Sriniketan,

> It is not the work of one, it must involve many … it is hard to imagine a life as cheerless as in our rural areas … If you cannot do anything else, at least cut yourself off from newspapers and take yourself to any village and give education to them with whom nobody has ever spoken; bring them happiness, hope, serve them, and let them know that there is a dignity in them as human beings, that they do not deserve the contempt of the universe. (Translation mine)

That was in 1938, close to the end of his life. He was still expressing the angst of those early years when he had first experienced it.

VI

Nationalism and Mahatma Gandhi

The movement, which has now succeeded the swadeshi agitation, is ever so much greater and has moreover extended its influence all over India. Previously, the vision of our political leaders had never reached beyond the English-knowing classes … . Nothing resembling self-sacrifice or true feeling for their countrymen was visible. At this juncture, Mahatma Gandhi came and stood at the cottage door of the destitute millions, clad as one of themselves, and talking to them in their own language … . So the name of Mahatma, which was given to him, was his true name. Who else has felt so many men of India to be his own flesh and blood? At the touch of Truth the pent-up forces of the soul are set free. As soon as true love stood at India's door, it flew open; all hesitation and holding back vanished … . No Congress or other outside institution succeeded in touching the heart of India … . Why should this not be our long waited opportunity?

Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

I regard the Poet as a sentinel warning us against the approach of enemies called Bigotry, Intolerance, Ignorance, Inertia and other members of that brood.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 1921

You have been to me a true friend because you have been a candid friend often thinking your thoughts aloud.

Gandhi to Rabindranath, 1932

It was in that longing to bring hope to the deprived people that Rabindranath and Gandhi felt really close. But they found themselves worlds apart in their methods. They were both carrying out rural reconstruction work at the same time. They both wanted to bring

self-reliance to the villages and unity among Hindus and Muslims as the prime goal to freedom. Both men focused on the peasantry as the largest class within Indian society, paralyzed by anachronistic traditions and weighed down by poverty and the absence of education. The major issues on which they differed were debated nationally. Before examining the specific issues in the controversy it would be useful to go over their general positions on freedom and nationalism. In *The Religion of Man* Rabindranath developed the position that:

> The history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship.

Gandhi applied the same principle to resolving India's racial conflict. Rabindranath took the idea further and went on to challenge the dominant political credo of his times, nationalism. He held that the system of the nation-state was 'a great menace' to the ideal of universal harmony or to the 'perfection of human relationship'. That was the premise on which he built his critique of nationalism.

It began with his reaction to the brutality of the Boer War (1890–2). He expressed his strong feelings in a sonnet called *Satabdir surya* (1899, 'Sunset of the Century') composed on the last day of the century and translated by him with the words:

> The last sun of the century sets amid the blood red clouds of
> the West and the whirlwind of hatred.
> The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium
> of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of
> vengeance …

The poem ends on a note of caution to India about her future:

> Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud and the
> powerful
> With your white robe of simplicity.
> Let your crown be of humility, your freedom, the freedom of the soul.
> Build God's throne daily upon the ample bareness of your poverty
> And know that what is huge is not great and pride is not everlasting.

Rabindranath's apprehensions for the future were borne out by the outbreak of the First World War. During the years 1916–17 he went to Japan, America, and Europe giving lectures against nationalism. What distressed him most was not so much its prevalence in the West as its spread in India. In Bengal, nationalist leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal and Chittaranjan Das went to the extent of giving the concept of nationalism an expression of 'divinity' for the future of India. Rabindranath spoke out against that trend. He argued that the stumbling block in India's future

lay in the social problems of the country such as the caste system and other similarly regressive traditions. What the country really needed, he wrote, was

> constructive work coming from within herself and the building of a good society.

He added that if the goal of political freedom is pursued to the exclusion of all else India may indeed become a sovereign state, but her social problems would continue to trouble her and obstruct the essential quest for moral and spiritual freedom without which her political freedom would be difficult to sustain. Although Gandhi agreed about the moral goal, he could not accept all of Rabindranath's criticisms of nationalism. Gandhi held firmly to the position that 'Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive'. On the contrary, he wrote, 'It is health-giving, religious and therefore humanitarian'. On this they agreed to differ and go their own ways. While Gandhi chose politics as the testing ground of his ethics, Rabindranath stayed away from politics and continued with his experiments in education and rural reconstruction at Santiniketan and Sriniketan. The importance of Santiniketan and Sriniketan in Rabindranath's life was that the work enabled him to free himself from the obsession with nationalism that prevailed in his country and in the world.

Gandhi was at work in India from 1915 since his return from South Africa. Rabindranath had great hopes for Gandhi's leadership after his Champaran *satyagraha* of 1917–18. Then came the Rowlatt satyagraha in 1919 which turned into an unprecedented public demonstration against the government. From then on there was no going back for Gandhi as the undisputed leader of a mass movement which included non-co-operation programmes of boycott of schools and colleges, the launching of the *charkha* (spinning wheel) as a nationwide spinning movement, and the burning of foreign cloth. Rabindranath was feeling increasingly uncomfortable with those methods. He went public with the controversy when Gandhi made spinning the central concept of his movement. Gandhi proclaimed that mass spinning by each and everyone in the country was essential because it would bring economic freedom to all, ensure the basic needs of every villager, provide work for all, and eliminate exploitation. Those values were precious also to Rabindranath but his objection was that Gandhi turned spinning into a political strategy for regimentation in the interest of Indian nationalism. He criticised it as 'despotism in place of freedom'. He saw it as a surrender of the 'dignity of man's intellect', as a 'denial of reason', as a demand for 'unquestioning obedience', and hit out with the question,

Obedience to whom? … . To some *mantra*, some unreasoned creed?

Predictably, the Congress moved a resolution in 1924 under Gandhi's recommendation that all Congress members must wear *khadi* or home-spun cloth when engaged in Congress work, and enlisted its members to spin and contribute a certain quantity of cloth on the charkha as a monthly contribution. The idea was to give the movement country-wide publicity, and also to make spinning a means of bonding between the masses and the politicians.

Rabindranath opposed the idea wholly and wrote out his arguments in an essay called 'The Cult of the Charka' (1925). He argued that if the idea was to attain *swaraj* (self rule) or freedom through spinning the charkha, he was yet to meet anyone who had a clear idea of the process. There was no discussion on the subject but only quarrelling over it, he added. He pressed on with his theme of serving the country instead by eradicating poverty if even in just one or two villages. That would bring the 'wealth of hope' to the 'three crores' of his countrymen, he wrote. Gandhi dismissed Rabindranath's criticism as 'poetic license' and encouraged him also to join the band of spinners: 'If the Poet spun half an hour daily his poetry would gain in richness, for it would then represent the poor man's wants and woes in a more forcible manner than now'. But Rabindranath continued to protest against it even though the charkha doctrine was then gaining an overwhelming influence in the country. He did not live to see this but Gandhi acknowledged many years later that the movement had defeated his principles. That was in 1944, at a conference of the Charkha Sangh, where he admitted that when he first introduced *khadi* he had not studied its implications till much later. He found then that he had been 'deceiving' himself. About the experience he wrote sadly: 'What I gave to the people was money and not the real substance—self-reliance'. He explained that what he basically wanted was to make the villages spin so that they could produce their own clothing and become self-reliant—at least in one vital respect of their lives. He did not intend them to sell the cloth that they spun. He wanted them to rejoice in the freedom and dignity of obtaining a vital commodity like clothing by their own means and their own effort. That was no different from Rabindranath's ideal to make the villages self-reliant so as to be able to produce their own requirements. The difference was that he never used the ideal as a political strategy for mass mobilization in his Sriniketan movement of rural reconstruction. Gandhi lived to despair that most people took up spinning simply because Gandhi asked them to, not because they believed in it. But Rabindranath was not one of them.

The other aspect of the charkha controversy between them arose out of Gandhi's position of opposition to science and the machine. Rabindranath saw in this position a return to the danger of isolation. He argued that the 'great war' had ushered in the 'new age' whereby the need of the day was for collaboration and co-operation between peoples, not isolation and non-co-operation. Machines used for the oppression of the whole world had to be resisted but not innovation and science per se. He held that there was a basic duality in man between the opposites of self-interest on the one hand and enlightened interest on the other. He believed there was every hope that enlightened interest would prevail over selfish interest. The horrors of the war had opened the people's minds to the possibility of a 'universal movement' with the promise of a united mankind for the future. He pointed out that Gandhi's leadership was the best possible hope to bring about this change because his freedom movement was founded with faith in the universal spirit and on the spirit of sacrifice in the service of the nation. He was anxious not to turn away from the new ray of hope on the horizon, the new spirit of the day, even accepting that our most 'immediate work' was our struggle for freedom.

It would be a sad day, Rabindranath warned, if we revert to the 'weak man's position' of putting the responsibility for our poverty on the sins of 'others'. There was no short-cut to reason and hard work if anything was to succeed, he argued. Nothing worthwhile was possible by 'mass conversion' to an idea. Our poverty was a complex phenomenon which could not be solved by one particular application such as spinning and weaving. Was our poverty due to the 'lack of sufficient thread', he asked, or was it rather due to 'our lack of vitality, our lack of unity'? If we know it to be the latter, then turning the wheels of the charkha would not ensure our swaraj from poverty nor from alien rule. He also objected to the burning of cloth by arguing that it hurt the poor by forcing them to sacrifice even the little they possessed for their dignity and survival. He wrote that buying and selling cloth from Manchester should be a matter of discourse in the realm of economics. Gandhi agreed that we must not be impatient for swaraj, '... we must stand for Truth no matter what its cost'. But he did not accept Rabindranath's argument against the burning of cloth. 'In burning *my* foreign clothes I burn my shame', declared Gandhi. He held that any 'economics' which hurts the well-being of an individual or a nation was 'immoral and therefore sinful'.

Rabindranath's dissent grew louder as the non-co-operation movement got hold of the country. In his essay called *Satyer Abahan* (1921, The Call of Truth) he expressed his undoubted faith in Gandhi's 'capacity for love' which 'has captured the heart of India'. But he maintained that the

movement launched by Gandhi was not in consonance with the spirit of freedom and truth even though Gandhi personified that spirit more than any other Indian leader. What he disliked in Gandhi's method was that there was 'stern pressure' to make everyone talk 'in the same voice' and to make them take the 'same steps'. To Rabindranath this was a manifestation of nationalism at its worst, a sign of our 'slavish mentality'. His apprehensions were confirmed by the nationwide *hartal*, or the suspension of all activities, organised by Gandhi against the Rowlatt Act of 1919. It received unprecedented public response but also led to several outbreaks of mob violence. Gandhi wrote to Rabindranath asking for a message of hope. But Rabindranath feared that in the given circumstances a mass movement was almost certain to intensify race hatred and the spirit of revenge. Gandhi assured him of a non-violent movement yet Rabindranath firmly discouraged Gandhi to stir up something for which the people did not have adequate spiritual preparation nor the self-discipline of restraint. The hartal, in fact, marked the beginning of Gandhi's emergence as the supreme leader of the Indian nationalist movement. Worried about some of those developments Rabindranath wrote to Gandhi,

> Power in all its forms is irrational; it is like the horse that drags the cart blindfolded.

Gandhi assured Rabindranath that his movement of 'Non-cooperation, non-violence and *swadeshi*' was intended to be 'a message to the world', not an 'exclusive' doctrine. He added that it was not any different from the poet's message of peace to the world. But Rabindranath could not accept Gandhi's rejection of Western thought and the benefits of science. In a lecture called *Sikshar Milan* (1921, 'The Union of Cultures') he pointed out that,

> Secular knowledge was in the possession of the European thinkers and scientists and we in the East who need it must seek their help … . If we are biased against Western science only because it belongs to the West, we shall not only deprive ourselves of the principles it has to teach, but pull down our own Eastern spirituality.

He spoke out similarly against the boycott of schools and colleges. He said that instead of boycotting education in a spirit of 'arrogant nationalism', India should seek to develop educational centres where the unity of spiritual and scientific knowledge would be cultivated.

The gap between the two men grew while, simultaneously, there was in the country a growing mentality of aggression and militancy during the months to come. There was even an outbreak of communal riots in

Bombay in the wake of the boycott and Gandhi went on a fast of penance. Rabindranath was then engaged with establishing his Sriniketan centre with Leonard Elmhirst's co-operation. In a letter of 1 February 1922, he wrote to Gandhi cautioning him that a political movement involving 'an immense multitude of different traditions and stages of cultures' was unlikely to remain non-violent for long. He respected Gandhi's mission of satyagraha for the people but insisted that it required patient education in ethical principles among the people. He forewarned Gandhi that a movement without such preparation can only bring disaster.

The only other major public debate between the two took place in 1934 when, shortly after the terrible earthquake in Bihar in 1924, Gandhi issued a public statement asserting that the calamity of the earthquake was 'a divine chastisement sent by God for the sin of untouchability'. An angry Rabindranath declared that such an explanation assumed God punished the guilty and the innocent alike as the victims of the earthquake included many children and untouchables. He also declared that it was completely 'unscientific' to associate cosmic phenomena with weaknesses in custom and human behaviour. He considered it unfortunate that Gandhi should in this way strengthen the elements of 'unreason' already so very powerful in India. In his words,

> Unreason is a fundamental source of all the blind powers that drive us against freedom and self-respect.

But Gandhi was adamant. He responded by writing, 'I cannot prove the connection of the sin of untouchability with the Bihar visitation, but the connection is instinctively felt by me'.

Rabindranath was also distressed by the growing rift in the Congress during the late thirties, but even more by the 'authoritarian attitude and conduct' of Gandhi towards Subhas Chandra Bose. When at the Tripura Congress a leading Gandhian called Seth Govinda Das demanded unquestioning obedience to the Mahatma after comparing him in glowing terms with Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin, Rabindranath protested in an open letter warning against 'fascist tendencies' in Indian politics. He repeatedly voiced his opposition to all forms of totalitarianism. He described it as

> the worst form of cancer to which humanity is subject.

Almost alone in his time, Rabindranath not only insisted that there could be more than one path to 'moral progress' but also that the greatest obstacle to be found in each of them was the 'slave mentality' that characterised nationalism. This was his singular contribution to the ideology

of Indian freedom. But his dissenting voice was not welcome. He was the most unpopular figure on the Indian national scene. The Bengali press as well as the national dailies of those days are proof of the nation-wide resistance to his ideas.

Rabindranath insisted that the greatest disservice which nationalism had rendered India was to have directed the country's attention away from its primary problem. Our primary problem was social, not political, he wrote:

> Society is the expression of those moral and spiritual aspirations of man which belong to his higher nature. If India pursues political independence to the exclusion of all else, she may attain a sovereign state; it will be one however in which the old social and moral maladies are not purged but magnified. Above all, a narrow quest for political liberty will only obscure India's real goal, which must always remain that of moral and spiritual freedom for the individual in society.

He wrote that neither of the political groups recognised the patent fact that there were weaknesses in our social organisation which made the Indian character incapable of coping with the alien government. The worst of these, he pointed out, is the domination of the caste system and the blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that are unsuited to the present age. He insisted that nationalism could not promote social and moral reform of the nature that was necessary; rather, it encouraged the popular appetite for increased political warfare. He gave examples to show how our nationalists lacked the will to bring about the social changes needed for India's political unity. In his essay called *Nationalism in India* (1916), he explained how and where our nationalists chose to overlook the existing loopholes in the path to unity. In his words,

> The general opinion of the majority of the present day nationalists in India is that we have come to a final completeness in our social and spiritual ideals, the task of the constructive work of society having been done several thousand years before we were born, and that now we are free to employ all our activities in the political direction. We never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our helplessness, because we have accepted as the creed of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all time to come by our ancestors, who had the superhuman vision of all eternity and supernatural power for making infinite provision for future ages. Therefore, for all our miseries and shortcomings, we hold responsible the historical surprises that burst upon us from outside. This is the reason why we think that our one task is to build a political miracle of freedom upon the quicksand of social slavery. In fact we want to dam up the true course of our own historical stream, and only borrow power from the sources of other people's history.

In the last years of that great trial in the history of the Indian struggle for independence Gandhi and Rabindranath came closer in their personal devotion to each other despite every disagreement in the national debates. The two issues they discussed with complete agreement were about attaining Hindu-Muslim unity and fighting the evils of untouchability and casteism. But what brought them specially near was the poet's anxieties over Gandhi's fasts. Gandhi himself sought Rabindranath's approval on the eve of his fasts justifying them as his penance for untouchability and the evils of his society. Rabindranath was completely in agreement with Gandhi but did not want him to fast. He sent many an anxious telegram and wrote letters to Gandhi every time he proposed a fast. For instance, Rabindranath wrote,

> And once again, I appeal to you for the sake of the dignity of our nation, which is truly impersonated in you, and for the sake of the millions of our countrymen who need your living touch and help to desist from any act that you think is good only for you and not for the rest of humanity and love. With deepest pain and love, Rabindranath Tagore.

In 1932, when Gandhi was in the Yeravda Jail in Poona fighting the issue of separate electorates for the depressed castes, Rabindranath went to visit him in jail unable to keep himself away. He was present by his bedside when Gandhi broke the fast. To him Gandhi's life was crucial to the country's welfare. He said so over and over again in his writings. If on any occasion Gandhi got arrested in the midst of a public debate between the two of them, Rabindranath immediately halted his criticism—so protective was he of the Mahatma. He believed that Gandhi alone brought courage to the hearts of those upon whom our society had heaped nothing but indignity for centuries. In his own life he felt increasingly closer to the sufferings of those unfortunate people and therefore to Gandhi and their common cause for humanity. They both agreed completely on the foremost need for social reform in India, as well as for the supremacy of moral or spiritual freedom. Rabindranath's contribution lies in his early and emphatic assertion that though India's adoption of nationalism might advance its struggle for independence, it would not help the quest for moral and spiritual freedom. He never tired of pressing for the cause of humanity as something more urgent than political freedom. Rabindranath had to do that all alone as Gandhi had taken on himself the responsibility for the political freedom of his country even though he believed no less in the moral goal. It was he who called Rabindranath the 'great sentinel' of the nation. In his *Nationalism in India* Rabindranath wrote:

Those of us in India who have come under the delusion that mere political freedom will make us free have accepted their lessons from the West as the gospel truth and lost their faith in humanity. We must remember that whatever weakness we cherish in our society will become the source of danger in politics. The same inertia that leads us to our idolatry of dead forms in social institutions will create in our politics prison-houses with immovable walls. The narrowness of sympathy which makes it possible for us to impose upon a considerable portion of humanity the galling yoke of inferiority will assert itself in our politics in creating the tyranny of justice.

VII

Creative Writing

When I turned back from the struggle to achieve results, from the ambition of doing benefit to others, and came to my own innermost need … then the unquiet atmosphere of the outward struggle cleared up and the power of spontaneous creation found its way through the centre of all things.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1908

It is impossible to finish reading in a lifetime all that Rabindranath wrote in one life.

A popular saying in Bengal

Whether it was closeness to the village world, or the lessons learnt from nationalist politics, each experience found form in Rabindranath's creative writing. Letters, short stories, essays, novels, drama, and poetry gave varied expression to his beliefs and his feelings, be it of joy over observing nature or of pain from seeing suffering, be it of protest against wrong done or of support for a humanitarian cause. The other aspect of his writings is his changing thought, changing in response to his own inner development and to the outer circumstances of his life. There were two contradictory pulls in his being, hence in his writing, of the traditional and the modern. But his writings are evidence that in the final analysis he did not share either the uncritical adulation of the past nor the militant nationalism against imperial rule, both inevitable in the existing historical situation. With his deepening sympathy for the suffering millions of his country, he emerged as a critic of the changes that Great Britain had brought to India. His political and social observations are easily deduced from the portrayals of the characters in his novels and stories. This chapter will offer only some samples of his literary output which reflect those features. The samples

used shall illustrate some of his major literary and personal thrusts. They are, at most, indicators of the evolution of his creativity. Anything more would require a whole book in itself.

Just as he invoked an ancient institution like a Brahmacharyasram when he first established his Santiniketan school, Rabindranath's early writing also revealed a traditional state of mind. He went through a phase of patriotic conservatism. In his essay called *Critique of Meghnadbadh* (1888), for example, he attacked Michael Madhusudan Datta for criticising the customs of our country. In his essay *Rammohun Roy* (1885) he praised Rammohun for his defense of the Hindu religion with the words,

> Brahma is India's living god; Jehovah, the Christian God or Allah are not quite akin to our thought.

Here he was clearly identifying India as Hindu. Elsewhere he wrote in the same vein,

> The Hindu people are unique in this world. They may, and at the same time may not, be called a distinct nation … . In Europe political unity has been the primary determinant of nationhood. The Hindus never had this unity but that does not prove they were not a nation.

But in the years to follow he grew out of his Hindu nationalist phase of thinking. He withdrew from the Swadeshi movement and moved closer to a new international liberalism of which he was a harbinger. But the patriotic songs he contributed to the Swadeshi movement in 1904–5 continued to inspire and move the national struggle. It has been said that Rabindranath sang Bengal into a nation. There is even a more recent example of that in the creation of Bangladesh. But it is equally true that his songs, for all their patriotic feeling, were remarkably free of chauvinism. That was perhaps because his love and concern for the human being were more fundamental to him than his commitment to nationalism, or any ideology for that matter. Thus he wrote when he renounced his knighthood in 1919,

> There is such a thing as a moral standard of judgment. When India suffers injustice, it is right that we should stand against it; and the responsibility is ours to right the wrong, not as Indians but as human beings.

This spirit of associating with a larger humanity, and the realization that India was a part of that same humanity like any other country of the world, led to his growing impatience with anachronistic tradition. The transition was reflected in a series of essays in which he developed his appeal for free and reasoned thinking and argued that Indians must move with the rest of humanity. The essays *Achar-er Atyachar* (1908, Tyranny of

Custom), *Prasanga Katha* (1908, Current Topics), to take some examples, were scathing attacks on the injustices that were current in Hindu society. He listed some of them: men were being punished for slaughtering a cow but not for killing a fellow human being: contact with the lower caste was an offence against society but destroying an opponent's property was not; a criminal had nothing to fear so long as he married his daughter according to the social norms. There was even an easier way out of crime. A ceremonial bath in the Ganges, for instance, wiped out both big and small crimes. In such a society, Rabindranath wrote, man was treated like a clog in a machine. He asked if it was God's intention that we should be Hindu and not human? He ended the essays on the hopeful note that Western education and Western learning had already touched the Indian mind and shown the way to 'distant objectives' by taking us beyond our 'narrow domestic walls' into ideas about nationhood and the unity of races. In another essay *Prachya o Protichya* (1908, East and West), he argued that indifference to the West's liberal values of humanism would not really help our people. Who could fail to see, he argued, how life-affirming and positive those ideas were? Who could deny how welcome they would be in a doctrinaire society such as ours? There was no need to fear that English education would make us 'English', he explained. At best it would bring a new context into our 'timeless existence', timeless because of our self-imposed isolation from the world.

At that juncture of his life when Rabindranath's mind was ready to embrace a larger humanity, we know how an opportunity came for him to live in the countryside and look after the Hindu and Muslim tenants of his family's estates in East Bengal. That was in the 1890s when he was put in charge of the family's estates by his father. The ten years that he spent there became one of his most creative and productive literary periods. Those years brought him into intimate contact with nature and the common man's life. He acknowledged the influence of that contact on his mind as 'beyond measure'. Living mostly in his 'Padma Boat' and watching life through its windows as he sailed up and down the rivers in it, a whole new world of sights and sounds and feelings opened up before him. The external world of nature fascinated him and became a source of deeper reflection in his works. Some of those feelings are conveyed in the passages translated by Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis:

> I feel the tenderness of the grass in my forest walk
> The wayside flowers startle me
> That the gifts of the infinite are strewn in the dust
> Wakens my song in wonder;

I have seen, have heard, have lived; in the depth of the known
have felt the truth
That exceeds all knowledge which fills my heart with wonder
And I sing.

(Mahalanobis, 'Rabindranath Tagore', 1974, p. 2)

He also wrote,

Once again I wake up when the night has waned,
When the world opens all its petals once more,
And this is an endless wonder.

(Mahalanobis, 'Rabindranath Tagore', 1974, p. 2)

And yet again he wrote, perhaps on seeing sunlight falling on the leaves,

How one likes the light dancing from leaf to leaf.

(Mahalanobis, 'Rabindranath Tagore', 1974, p. 2)

Apart from such magical poetry inspired by the rural experience, the creations that stand out most prominently from that period were the series of letters he wrote as well as his short stories. We have earlier noted that the letters are full of vivid details of everyday village life and also of his thrills with nature. They are known for their great literary merit and were later published as *Chhinnapatra* (1912, Torn Letters), also as a selection in English translation called *Glimpses of Bengal* (1921). Once while watching the advent of a monsoon storm from his boat anchored on the river Padma, he wrote a graphic and ebullient account of it in one of those letters:

The little boats scurried off into the smaller arm of the river and clung with their anchors safely to its banks. The reapers lifted up the cut sheaves on their heads and hurried homewards; the cows followed, and behind them frisked the calves waving their tails. Then came an angry uproar. Torn-off scraps of cloud hurried up from the west like panting messengers of evil tidings. Finally, lighting and thunder, rain and storm, came jostling together and executed a mad dervish dance. The bamboo clamps howled as the raging wind swept the ground with them, now to the east now to the west. Over them all, the storm droned like a giant snake-charmer's pipe, and to its rhythm swayed hundreds and thousands of crested waves, like so many hooded snakes.

He also expressed in those letters his innermost feelings for the people he observed. He was torn by what he saw of the miseries of the hapless Bengal peasant, both Hindu and Muslim. He wrote,

I feel a great tenderness for these peasant folk—our ryots—big, helpless children of Providence, who must have food brought to their very mouths or they are undone. When the breasts of mother-earth dry up all they can do is to cry. As

soon as the hunger is somewhat appeased they forget everything else. Whether the socialist dream of all children sharing alike the heritage of the earth can ever be realised, I know not; but if such an ideal is wholly unattainable and cannot even be made partially feasible, then I must say the Law that governs human destiny is indeed cruel and man a truly unfortunate creature. If suffering must exist in this world, be it so; but let there be some loophole, some possibility somewhere to spur the best in man to a ceaseless endeavour, to nurse an undying hope.

Those words were his own writing on the wall foreshadowing his life's work in rural reconstruction which we have studied in the previous pages.

In the letters of *Chhinnapatra* there was ample material also for his short stories on the lives of the villagers. He used the short story as a literary form for the first time in this period and wrote over fifty short stories in the decade of 1891 to 1901. The themes varied from man's lust for gold and woman's ambition to tragic heroines, romance, frustrated hopes, ghosts, limitations of human judgment, intransigence of the colonial rulers, inhuman exploitation of the weak, and the helplessness of our people. They were also a mirror to his exasperations over the apathy of village society. We know how desperately he wanted to do something for the people of his country. Many of his stories were based on the lives of women and children, particularly little girls, about whom he wrote with great compassion. The story called *Postmaster* is one such sample. The story is about a young city-bred man posted in a village post office for the first time in his life. An orphan girl of that village called Ratan worked as his maid and in the evenings he told her stories of the city because he missed his life there very much. She also learned to read and write from him. Once when the postmaster fell ill with malaria Ratan watched over him day and night. But he took all that devotion for granted and on recovering he resigned from his post to return to the city. Having nobody she could call her own, young Ratan had grown attached to her master and she begged him to take her to the city with him. What an absurd idea, he laughed, and did the obvious by offering her some money when he left. She broke down and cried and ran away from his sight without taking the money. Leaving her behind he boarded his boat and drifted away. This was Rabindranath's immortal story of the irredeemable tragedy of little Ratan's existence or, shall we say, non-existence?

There is also the story called *Kabuliwala* (1894, Fruitseller from Kabul) about a Pathan dry fruit seller who becomes fond of a little Bengali girl called Mini who reminded him of his own little daughter in faraway Kabul. Mini also loved to chat with him and listen to his stories. She was not afraid of him like her middle-class parents were. Not heeding their warning, she would come running to the gate on hearing his call as he was

never allowed into the house. Kabuliwalas were thought to be child kidnappers in middle-class Bengali society. Rabindranath often dwelt on these irrational but commonplace attitudes in his short stories and created tragedies out of them. His kabuliwala returned home to Kabul, heartbroken, when Mini got married and left her family house where he used to come and see her every day.

We already know how the years that followed his stay in East Bengal were of great personal sorrow in his life—starting with the death of his wife in 1902. A few months after his wife's death their second daughter Renuka fell ill. His renowned collection of poems for children called *Sisu* (1903, Child) was written at this time while nursing Renuka and looking after the two younger children in the absence of their mother. The poems are so full of innocent delight that nobody could tell how anxious and grief-stricken he must have been at the time. It is worth noting that the *Sisu* poems were of the same year as the collection called *Smaran* (1903, In Memoriam), all written after his wife's death. An immortal and oft-quoted passage from *Sisu* reads as follows:

> Pearl-fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while the children gather pebbles and scatter them again … On the endless seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.

In 1903, nine months after her mother's death, Renuka died. There was more sorrow to come with the deaths of a young and promising teacher of the Santiniketan school in 1904, Rabindranath's father in 1905, and his youngest son Samindra in 1907. In a poem written at that time he identified himself with a beggar woman who was stopped by a prince asking for alms. Embarrassed, she took out a copper coin from her tattered bag and put it in his hand. When she returned home she found a gold coin in her bag. Holding the gold coin she broke down and wept thinking 'why did I not give him my all'? The years 1906–16 constituted a most profound phase of Rabindranath's creative life. Not only did he write some of his finest lyrics included in the collections called *Kheya* (1906, Crossing), *Gitanjali* (1910), *Balaka* (1916, *A Flight of Swans*, 1955), and the two plays *Raja* (1911, King) and *Dakghar* (1911, *The Post Office*, 1914), but also the novel *Gora* (1910), each in its way an expression of liberation from bondage. In those years his verse was becoming increasingly an offering to God, of finding in God 'the medium of a higher love, shorn of all superficial ornaments'. Coming from an inner surrender, after much personal pain, the language of these poems was simple and direct, as for example,

> My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration.

Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between Thee and me; their jingling would drown our whispers.

Whether written to find inner peace when facing the deaths of his beloved ones, or written for the future of his country, or written as poems of romantic love, those poems of the *Gitanjali* genre were like prayers to his jiban-debata whom he sought in all of his work, in his creations and in nature, constantly. This was also around the time when he met Gandhi and found a kindred spirit in him. Rabindranath had been fighting his country's cause with his powerful pen. His drama *Achalayatan* (1912, Immovable) mocked the obduracy of Hindu orthodoxy, his novel *Gharey Baire* (1916, *The Home and the World*, 1919) attacked the corrupting influence of Swadeshi politics on Hindu-Muslim racism, and *Gora* (1910) recorded the tense moral and political struggle of modern India. It is remarkable that Rabindranath's writings of a hundred years ago had alerted us to the social injustices that continue to hurt our lives to this day. He responded to his critics who accused him of 'deserting' the political battle by writing a drama called *Prayaschitta* (1909, Atonement). It was no desertion, he argued, but atonement or *prayaschitta*, much needed for a cleansing of the heart or *chittasuddhi*. He was characteristically candid in self-criticism when he wrote explaining his own transformation:

There had been a time when I too tried to love and call by sweet names this prison covering our whole country, but my inner soul had remained discontented … Oh, how impenetrable the walls, how solid its foundation! An achievement certainly, but does it deserve to be admired ?

As his biographer Krishna Kripalani points out, '… the present generation is hardly aware of their debt to the man who had the vision and the courage to say what he did, and at no little cost to his popularity'.

Discerning critics have said that he wrote some of his finest poetry and drama in the final decade of his life from 1930 to 1940, his 'last harvest' in a biographer's words. He wrote seven volumes of verse in those years of which four were prose-poems, *Punascha* (1932, Postscript), *Sesh Saptak* (1935, Last Melodies), *Patraput* (1936, Plate of Leaves), and *Syamali* (1936). It was also a time when he was following Gandhi's battle over untouchability and the 'depressed humanity' closely. The commitment and anxiety he felt for the cause were directly reflected in his writings. A powerful illustration is found in his drama *Chandalika* (1933, Untouchable Girl). The story of the drama is based on an old Buddhist legend which he turned into a tense spiritual conflict between the ideals of love and of renunciation. In this drama Buddha's disciple Ananda asks for a drink of water from a girl who was drawing water from a wayside well. Being an

untouchable she hesitated to serve him the water knowing that her touch was polluting to the high-born. But Ananda assured her that she was like any other human being and taught her to judge herself not by the arbitrary rules imposed by society but by her capacity for love and sacrifice as a human being. The girl, whom the poet named Prakriti, meaning Nature, described that encounter with the Buddhist monk as her 'new birth'. Ananda had taught her that she had the right to give and take love like any other human being. He had revealed to her that a religion that humiliates the human being is no religion. With the assurance of her 'new birth' she wanted desperately to give herself in love to Ananda. Blinded by desire and her newly found humanity, she forgot that he was a monastic who had renounced desire. She decided to use the 'magic spell' to drag him back to her doorsteps from wherever he was. He was indeed brought to her thus, but when he came he no longer looked like himself. His face was distorted in anguish at the invitation of desire. Ashamed of her action Chandalika or Prakriti asked his forgiveness and came to realize that love brings freedom, not bondage.

The plays he wrote and set to music and dance were second only to his songs in popularity. They were often directed by him and staged during his life time by students at Santiniketan. Besides *Chandalika* there were the dramas *Taser Desh* (1933, Kingdom of Cards), *Chitrangada* (1892), and *Syama* (1939), both titles taken from the names of the heroines of those plays. In the years that followed he was frequently critically ill and in the year 1937 came close to death. He continued to write and paint even after his recovery, but it seemed from some of the expressions of that period that he was writing 'in heart's blood', as a critic put it. Among them were the collections of verses called *Prantik* (1938, Land's End), *Akas-Pradip* (1939, Lamp in the Sky), *Nabojatak* (1940, New-Born) and *Sanai* (1940, Flute). He himself described those poems as his encounter with the 'new age'. Another World War had broken out in Europe, reminding him sadly of the agony of the earlier war of 1914–18 which had pushed him into the public arena to preach the message of peace. On this occasion it was all much more sad for he was too infirm for action. That sense of helplessness was compounded by a crumbling faith in the modern civilization of the day. In a letter of 1938 he wrote,

> Aldous Huxley's latest book Ends and Means came as a great consolation at this trying time of iconoclastic nihilism. It is a torture for me to have to witness, in the last chapter of my life, the nauseating sight of maniacs let loose making playthings of all safeguards of human culture.

He ended this letter written to his English biographer and friend

Edward Thompson with a short poem in Bengali which can be translated as follows:

> Today, man's achievement
> Is an ugly mockery
> Announcing itself everywhere
> The face of a monster.
> Must I have to witness this ugly nightmare
> By lighting a stormy lamp
> In the twilight hour of my life? (Translation mine)

What made Rabindranath's creative writing so timeless and universal was that it reflected his personal experience of the human condition and how he came to terms with it.

VIII

Nobel Prize and Beyond

> On the day I was to board the ship I fainted due to my frantic efforts at leave taking and the journey had to be postponed. Then I went to Shelidah to take rest. But unless the brain is fully active, one does not feel strong enough to relax completely; the only way to keep calm was to take up some light work …
> So I took up the poems of *Gitanjali* and set myself to translate them one by one. You may wonder why such a crazy ambition should possess someone in such a weak state of health. But believe me I did not take up this work in a spirit of reckless bravado. I simply felt an urge to recapture through the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in the days gone by. The pages of a small exercise-book came to be filled gradually, and with it in my pocket I boarded the ship.
>
> Rabindranath, 1912

> *Gitanjali* was not simply an Indian voice, strange and far, but it was also 'our voice'.
>
> W.B. Yeats, 1912

It is possible that Rabindranath saw his life in two halves in relation to his writings. His autobiography or *Jibansmriti* published in 1912 covered approximately the first fifty years of his life. He did not write a sequel to it to include the thirty years that followed. Yet, much more happened in this second half of his life not the least of which was his astounding success with the translations into English of the *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*) that won him the Nobel prize for literature in 1913. In his literary career the significance of the episode is that it turned him into a bilingual author. It identified him as a poet 'with a new voice' which coincided with his becoming a religious speaker and a spokesman for the unity of the races. His 'new' career compelled him to write serious prose directly in English.

The process began with his visit to America in 1912 almost immediately after the celebration of his poems in England. On arrival in America he began to write his *Sadhana* essays in English. These essays were based on his *Santiniketan* sermons delivered at the school's prayer meetings and later published in several volumes as *Santiniketan* (1909–16). The sermons were Upanishadic in content and perception. While in America he read out the first four of his *Sadhana* essays, one by one, when invited by the local Unitarians to speak to the campus Unity Club. After he finished writing *Sadhana* he grew restless to communicate India's message to the West to a larger public in America. An opportunity presented itself when the Federation of Religious Liberals invited him to give an address to their Congress at Rochester in 1913. The topic of his speech there was 'Race Conflict' which was greatly appreciated. Invitations then began to pour in from the universities of Chicago, Harvard, and New York.

His writings in English came in two streams, essays and discourses or lectures written directly in English and also as translations of his Bengali poetry. The only poem he wrote directly in English was called *The Child* (1930). It was inspired by the 'Passion plays' he saw in Germany. At least ten books of his essays were published in English during the years 1913 to 1941 plus a large volume of prefaces and forewords, speeches and addresses. Although independent and self-contained, his English writings are extensions of his Bengali prose works. No systematic work has yet been done comparing the Bengali and the English versions by way of how they present the issues and the concerns with regard to the separate audiences he was addressing. But a close reading of the existing translations shows clearly that many of them are not translations as such. Critics have aptly referred to them as 'transcreations'. At times two Bengali poems have been fused into one, at times three poems have emerged from one poem in the original and quite often, particularly towards the end of his English career, they became almost new poems with only faint resemblances to the Bengali originals from which they were drawn. This is what he once wrote about his own English writing:

> My English writing emerges out of my subconscious. Once I mount the peak of conscious will all my wit and wisdom get muddled. That is why I cannot gird up my loins to do a translation. I can only set my boat adrift and not sit at the helm at all. Then, if and when I touch shore, I cannot quite understand myself how it all happened.

His English prose will be remembered for a long time as a testament of modern India responding to the changes of the century. 'More than any other Indian', wrote Jawaharlal Nehru, 'he [Rabindranath] has helped to

bring into harmony the ideals of the East and the West and broadened the bases of Indian nationalism. He has been India's internationalist par excellence, believing and working for international cooperation, taking India's message to other countries and bringing their message to his own people'.

In the summer of 1912, Rabindranath took to England some translations of his favourite poems. He did the translations when recuperating from a bout of ill-health just before his journey. The English painter William Rothenstein introduced the translations to the literary circles of England. This was to lead to a Nobel prize for Rabindranath in 1913, the first such to be awarded to an Indian or even to an Asian. It was given for his collection called *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*). He had been to England on two occasions earlier, first in his student days in 1878 and for the second time, briefly, with his elder brother Satyendranath in 1890. This time, in 1912, the occasion for a visit was his health. Struggles with the Santiniketan school, pain from the deaths in the family, excessive literary activity in efforts to sublimate the pain, disappointments over the political agitation that he had given leadership to, all contributed to the strains on his health. He was advised a long sea-voyage. Seats were booked on a boat sailing from Calcutta to London. His son Rathindranath and daughter-in-law Pratima were to accompany him. We know from Rathindranath's memoir that early on the morning of the journey his father was in a state of collapse. His doctors advised complete rest. He went away to their family estates on the banks of the Padma to rest and recover his health. It was there that he started to translate some of his poems as he has himself put on record:

> It was then the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), the air was thick with the fragrance of mango-blossoms and all hours of the day were delirious with the song of birds … . When a child is full of vigour he does not think of his mother. It is only when he is tired that he wants to nestle in her lap. That was exactly my position. With all my heart and all my holiday I seemed to have settled comfortably in the arms of *Chaitra*, without missing a particle of light, its air, its scene and its song. In such a state one cannot remain idle. It is an odd habit of mine, as you know, that when the air strikes my bones, they tend to respond in music. Yet I had not the energy to sit down and write anything new. So I took up the poems of *Gitanjali* and set myself to translate them one by one.

This was the first time he was translating his own work. He had been thinking of doing this for a while. His friends and admirers in India and in England had urged him to translate his work into English himself. Some translation had been done by others. Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, a teacher of English at the Santiniketan school who wrote the first literary study of Rabindranath in Bengali in 1912, was an early translator. There were also

translations by the art historian Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and by Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda's Irish-born disciple. Between 1909 and 1912, at least fifteen of his short stories and nine poems had been published in English translation in *The Modern Review*, the best-known Calcutta journal of the time. The translations that he did on the eve of his 1912 journey to England finally became his English *Gitanjali* (*Song-Offerings*). They were translated from a motley collection of his poems, not all from the Bengali *Gitanjali* as is the popular notion. Only half of them were from the Bengali *Gitanjali*, the rest from nine other books of his poetry among which were *Chaitali* (1896, From *Chaitra*), *Kalpana* (1900, Imagination), *Naibedya* (1901, Offering), *Sisu* (1903, Child), *Smaran* (1903, In memoriam), *Utsarga* (1903, Dedication), *Kheya* (1906, Crossing), *Gitimalya* (1910, Garland of Songs), *Achalayatan* (1912, Immovable). Most of these selections belonged to the devotional genre of his lyrics.

In his memoirs, Rathindranath gives us an interesting insight into his father's translations of that time. He mentions how a poor and illiterate *Vaishnavi* would sometimes come to see Rabindranath on his visits to the family estates in East Bengal and talk to him about philosophy and religion. 'Her simple and devout faith moved father deeply', wrote Rathindranath, and added, 'This return to the haunt of the best years of his creative life and the pleasant languor of convalescence stimulated by his conversations with the *Vaishnavi* must have had something to do with the selection of the poems and also with the manner of rendering them into English'.

With his health improved, Rabindranath left for England on 27 May 1912 accompanied by his son and daughter-in-law. They reached London and stayed in a hotel. Feeling extremely lost and lonely he decided to get in touch with William Rothenstein who had been in Calcutta in 1911 to meet Rabindranath's nephew, the painter Abanindranath Tagore. But from Rothenstein's own account of that visit he was not really introduced to Rabindranath on that visit. In this memoir Rothenstein wrote: 'Abanindranath Tagore and Goganendranath [sic.] Tagore came to take me to their home in Jorasanko; a delightful house, full of lovely things, of paintings, bronzes, stuffs and musical instruments ... . I was attracted, each time I went to Joransanko, by their uncle, dressed in a white dhoti and chaddur, who sat silently listening as we talked .... That this uncle was one of the remarkable men of his time no one gave me a hint ... . I happened, in *The Modern Review*, upon a translation of a story signed Rabindranath Tagore, which charmed me; I wrote to Jorasanko—were other such stories to be had ?'

Rabindranath looked up Rothenstein's phone number and called him.

Rothenstein quickly found better living quarters for them in his own neighbourhood in Hampstead and moved them from the Bloomsbury hotel in which they were staying. He went to see them often. One day when he asked to see Rabindranath's work he was given the exercise book with the translations. Rothenstein found the poems 'of a mystical character … still more remarkable than the story' he had read in *The Modern Review*. He sent the poems to W. B. Yeats. He invited a group of culturally influential friends to dinner at the Trocadero restaurant in London on 10 July 1912 where Yeats presided. The dinner was followed by an evening in Rothenstein's house when Rabindranath's poems were read out by Yeats. Those present were charmed. The outpouring of appreciation for the lyrics was unanimous.

Soon afterwards Yeats and Rothenstein along with another member of their circle, the designer Thomas Sturge Moore, worked together to publish a private edition of the English *Gitanjali* through the recently established India Society of London. 'That beautiful edition', wrote Rathindranath, '… very soon afterwards fetched high prices at Christie's'. The India Society edition was followed by its re-print by the Macmillan Company of London which also sold several hundred copies thus swelling the demand for the *Gitanjali* translations well before the Nobel prize was awarded. He was quickly acclaimed to be a 'great poet' by the literary elite of England. That sensational London season closed with another reception given to him by a group of writers and artists led by Yeats. It began with a reading from the *Gitanjali* by Yeats and was followed by felicitations from other literary groups. While responding to these appreciations Rabindranath read out a few of his unpublished poems and, at the end, sang the Bengali song *Vande Mataram*. The audience responded by giving him a standing ovation. He must have been eager to honour his country to want to sing this patriotic song at a private gathering of English friends and well-wishers.

He saw God's hand in the *Gitanjali* episode. Just before that visit to England, in an address at Santiniketan, he spoke of the contemplated journey to the West as a 'pilgrimage'. It was without a particular mission, he said. He felt it was happening in response to God's will, adding that his songs were his offering to God. After going to England he wrote that he believed his visit was an opportunity given by God for a meeting of the races, that he felt it to be his responsibility to bring this about. He wrote,

> Yeats himself, after editing my poems and writing an introduction will see to their publication. As usual, the prospect elates me and wearies me at one and the same time. To have come all the way here and then to find myself again staring at myself and fiddling with my work, is so unpalatable that I want to flee to

Germany. But then I reflect that it was for this that my God dragged me to this country at my age—for it is literature, art and such like that are the real bridges uniting one country with another ... . I feel as if God is expressing His own gladness through others' praise of my work; it is as if he has brought me from East to West in order to make me aware of the fact of his gladness. His grace cannot be accepted in a state of infatuation, which is why I am preparing myself to submit to the honour with my forehead touching the dust. (Dutta and Robinson, eds, *Selected Letters*, 1997, p. 90).

The news of the Nobel prize reached him in Santiniketan on 13 November 1913. This was followed by a great demand for his work in English. In response to that demand he put together more and more translations of his writings, done mostly by others but overseen by him. The Macmillan Company published the translations in quick succession. The titles were: *The Gardener*, *Sadhana: Realisation of Life*, and *The Crescent Moon* in 1913; *Chitra*, *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *The Post Office* in 1914; *Fruit Gathering*, *Stray Birds*, and *Hungry Stones and Other Stories* in 1916; *My Reminiscences*, *Sacrifice and Other Plays*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *Nationalism*, and *Personality* in 1917; *Lover's Gift and Crossing*, *Mashi and Other Stories*, and *Stories from Tagore* in 1918, just to take the first five years after the Nobel prize. His English poetry became a part of England's literary canon, but, predictably, and as anticipated by the poet himself, his post-*Gitanjali* work did not attract the same interest. It is said that the poor quality of the hurried translations marred his poetic reputation in the West. Rabindranath seemed not to have been concerned over this. He was never sure of the depth of the adulation he received in the West although he admitted to feeling humbled by it. He wrote,

> My impression is that when a place from which nothing is expected somehow produces something, even an ordinary thing, people are amazed—that is the state of mind here.

There has not been any substantial literary enquiry on the subject of Rabindranath's poetry in their English translation and the changes in the West's attitude to it after the 1926 study by Edward J.Thompson called *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*. However what is important is that this was the West's first encounter with modern Indian literature, although it was not the first time that a group of writers was responding to an Indian poet. The difference was that on this occasion these were not Orientalist scholars engaged with ancient languages and religions. Rabindranath's literary circle in England were men who were interested in modern India. Hence the encounter held out the promise of more such connections in the future.

Soon after his reception in England, Rabindranath went to America in October 1912. There, as we know, he settled down to write some spiritual discourses which were published with the title *Sadhana: Realisation of Life* (1913). *Sadhana* was his second work in English after the *Gitanjali* translations. He made his debut as a religious speaker in the West with the *Sadhana* essays. That was the beginning of his reputation as a prophet from the East. Giving spiritual lectures was not a new activity for Rabindranath, but this was the first time he was doing it in the West. In Calcutta and in Santiniketan he had been regularly speaking and writing on aspects of religion. During his stay in America from October 1912 to March 1913, he did not once speak about poetry in spite of all the feting over his poetry in England. In America, the spiritual essays of *Sadhana* competed with the *Gitanjali* poems as his most representative work. It was only after the success of his 'mystical' poetry in the West that he found the confidence to tell the West about the greatness of India's spiritual heritage. He believed he was thus carrying out his God-given responsibility to reach out to the West with the 'message of the East'.

There was clearly a need for a spiritual 'message', judging from the hunger with which *Gitanjali* was celebrated in so many parts of Europe. The poet Andre Gide translated the book into French and, within a year of the first French edition in 1913, a second edition was out in early 1914. The playwright Bertold Brecht wrote a review in 1914 of one of the early German translations of *Gitanjali* by Hans Klee saying that these poems had come into their hands in the difficult years of the war from 'a sunny land of peace'. 'It is proof of this Indian poet-philosopher's great mastery that he succeeds in captivating us even at this time … . As testimony to a superior and, in a sense, timeless wisdom, ennobled by the refined culture of their homeland, they may, even nowadays, provide hours of the purest spiritual edification for they sound the flute of eternal beauty'. Within the year 1913–14, *Gitanjali* was translated into French, Swedish, Dutch, Spanish, German, and Danish. In 1912–13 Europe was desperate for peace and tranquillity from fear of an impending war. That is when fortuitously Rabindranath was able to help.

In the middle of 1916 Rabindranath again set sail, first to Japan and then to America. Reacting against the war, he was armed with a set of three lectures for this visit: 'Nationalism in Japan', 'Nationalism in the West', and 'Nationalism in India'. These were together published in *Nationalism* (1917). His lecture on 'Nationalism in Japan' created a sensation in that country. In it he attacked Japan's imperialist policy in China. A lecture he gave to the Imperial University of Tokyo called 'India's message to Japan' contained his criticism of war and territorial

aggression. The Japanese government did not like it. Continuing with his mission, his first lecture in America called 'The Cult of Nationalism' was given in Seattle on 25 September. It was an unequivocal critique of the West's militant nationalism declaring that the spirit of nationalism was harmful to the world as proved by the war and by Britain's colonization of India. Just as his lectures had been unwelcome in Japan, they were also strongly disliked by his American audiences specially in view of the fact that he was raising funds for Visva-Bharati, his proposed international centre at Santiniketan, with those lectures. Newspaper reports wrote sarcastically that he was 'scolding Americans @ $700/- per scold'! The opposition to his lectures was worst on the East Coast of America where they strongly supported the European war. His attack on nationalism was particularly ill-timed as there was an upsurge in patriotism among the nations which were still sacrificing lives in the war. He cut short his stay in America and returned to Santiniketan. One outcome of all this was that his image of being a mystic poet from the East was no longer popular.

On his tour of Europe in May 1920 his ideas for an international university drew a large circle of supporters. The savant Romain Rolland read his essays on Nationalism, translated some portions of them into French, and drew up a document against the war called the 'Declaration of Independence of the Spirit' on behalf of 'European artists and intellectuals'. As soon as the war was over, Rolland wrote to Rabindranath asking him to sign the Declaration. 'The reading of *Nationalism* has been a great joy for me; for I entirely agree with your thoughts', wrote Rolland. 'After the disaster of this shameful World War which marked Europe's failure, it has become evident that Europe alone cannot save herself. Her thought is in need of Asia's thought, just as the latter has profited from contact with Europe's thought … . I wish that henceforth the intellect of Asia might take a more definite part in the manifestation of the thought of Europe. My dream will be that one day we may see the union of these two hemispheres of the spirit; and I admire you for having contributed towards this more than anyone else'. Rabindranath must have taken heart from those words which went to show that his efforts had not been entirely futile. He wrote in 1920,

> Now that I know more closely than ever that Santiniketan belongs to the world we shall have to be worthy of this fact.

IX

Visva-Bharati, a World University

The task of my last years is to free the world from the coils of national chauvinism.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1916

The territorial boundaries of the world have disappeared in the modern age. We the people of the world have geographically come closer. Our unity must stand on love, not hate.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1918

Where truth is concerned there is no question of East or West. That is the truth we must strive for here at Visva-Bharati.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

[Visva-Bharati] will not be a mere school ; it will be a pilgrimage. Let those coming to it say, oh what a relief it is to be away from narrow domestic walls and to behold the universe.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

I represent in my institution an ideal of brotherhood, where men of different countries and different languages can come together. I believe in the spiritual unity of man and therefore I ask the world to accept this task from me. Unless it comes and says, 'We also recognize this ideal', I shall know that this mission has failed.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1931

In a talk on Visva-Bharati and what brought it to being in his conception, Rabindranath touched on the history of his own relationship with the world. His family was a large household. In that household, he told his audience, there was a lot of discussion on World literature as well as on Bengali literature and about music. There Goethe was read in German, De Maupassant in French, *Sakuntala* in Sanskrit,

Macbeth in English. He absorbed every bit of that cosmopolitan environment. In that household he experienced the thrill of learning from many sources of knowledge. At the age of sixteen, he wrote an analytical essay on the possibility of material prosperity in Bengal and that of building up a new civilization through the meeting of East and West with the title *Bangali-r asha o noirashyo* (1878, Hope and Despair of Bengalis). The subjects of his other essays written in that period (1878–80) are *The Anglo-Saxons and their Literature*, *Dante and Beatrice*, *Petrarch and his Laura*, *Goethe's Loves'*, *Anglo-Norman Literature.* That would not have been possible, he told his audience, with the system of education in his day which merely prepared the student's path to a means of livelihood, not to a world of learning. The prevalent education did not create any curiosity or consciousness in the student's mind about belonging to something beyond his narrow domestic walls. During his speech on Visva-Bharati, Rabindranath put a fundamental question to his listeners. He asked,

> Should my joy of learning and appreciating literature stop with Bengali literature because I am born a Bengali ? Have I not been born to the world? Are not the creations of every philosopher, every poet, every scientist as much for me as for anybody else? Should that realisation not make me proud of my place in the world? (Translation mine)

It was essential, he continued, to have access to the world's fountain of knowledge. Imperial rule had restricted our entry into that arena. Visva-Bharati was going to help us break out of that isolation. In his words,

> India has been cut off from the world's scholarship, treated only to trifles in the name of education and relegated to a perennial primary school. We now want freedom from this spiritual and intellectual humiliation. (Translation mine)

The award of the Nobel prize gave Rabindranath the opportunity of establishing personal contact with different countries of the world. He went round the world presenting the idea of Visva-Bharati as a meeting place for scholars from the East and the West to share their learning. We know already of Romain Rolland's support, but the crowds of unknown people who came to listen to Rabindranath's talks in Europe also cheered the idea. About them he wrote,

> Such idealists I have often met in my travels in the West, unknown persons of no special reputation, who suffer and struggle for a cause most often ignored by the clever and the powerful … .

In this connection he also came to meet the sympathetic French Indologist Sylvain Levi of the Sorbonne and took the opportunity to

invite him to Visva-Bharati. In an account of their meeting Rabindranath wrote,

> I told Professor Levi of my idea of gathering the scholars of the world to my centre of learning at Visva-Bharati with some diffidence. He was at the time invited to give lectures at Harvard University. Harvard was among the world's famous universities. But nobody knew of our Visva-Bharati. Levi accepted my invitation to this unknown Ashram with much respect.

In December 1921, Rabindranath officially inaugurated Visva-Bharati and declared that Visva-Bharati was India's invitation to the world, her offer of sacrifice to the highest truth of the unity of man. Sylvain Levi came as the first 'visiting professor' to Visva-Bharati. He and Madame Levi came to Santiniketan in November 1921 and stayed till August 1922. Besides teaching the Chinese and Tibetan languages, Levi gave a series of lectures on the connections between ancient India and the West. Madame Levi taught French. Rabindranath attended those lectures.

Four different categories of people were associated with the new institution. First, there were the professors or the *acharyas*, men of scholarly learning such as Professor Levi to whom every opportunity was given at Visva-Bharati for pursuing their research. Second, there were the students or the *chhatra* who had already attained proficiency in a particular field but came to Visva-Bharati for advanced studies; the famed Indian linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyaya, then a young scholar at Calcutta University, was one such advanced student of Visva-Bharati who commuted between Calcutta and Santiniketan. It is on record that Rabindranath personally identified such individuals and invited them to join the institution and enrich the classes. When Visva-Bharati was first started the teachers of the Santiniketan school were given the opportunity to become students of the visiting professors along with the few students who came from outside of the institution. Third, there were the teachers or the *adhyapaka* recruited by Visva-Bharati as regular faculty. Fourth, there was an outside support group called the 'friends of Visva-Bharati' or *bandhab*, who would occasionally come to Visva-Bharati on invitation as scholars-in-residence, writers, artists, or even donors. The 'friends' were sometimes entrusted with raising funds for Visva-Bharati in India and abroad. The British sociologist-philosopher Patrick Geddes came as a 'friend' to Santiniketan.

Rabindranath laid down that there would be no room for opposing interests in Visva-Bharati but only a common ground for scholars in facing the challenges of the modern day. Artists would create objects of beauty not for the benefit of a single country but for the emerging unity of a worldwide civilization. His ideal was reflected in the university's new

constitution: 'To study the mind of man in its realisation of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view'. He wrote,

> It is a unique fact in the history of the world today, that the human races have come together as they have never done before .... The mentality of the world has to be changed in order to meet the new environment of the modern age.
>
> It has been said in our scriptures: '*atithi devo bhavo*', asking us to realize that the Divine comes to us as our guest, claiming our homage. All that is great and true in humanity is ever waiting at our gate to be invited. It is not for us to question about the country to which it belongs, but to receive it in our home and bring before it the best we have.
>
> Our wealth is truly proved by our ability to give, and Visva-Bharati is to prove this on behalf of India. Our mission is to show that we have a place in the heart of the great world; that we fully acknowledge our obligation of offering it our hospitality.

Rabindranath carried the message of Visva-Bharati far and wide. In 1924 he visited China. In his address there he reminded his hosts of the days when Emperor Asoka of India sent messengers of peace and universal love to the different countries of the world, not conquering armies. He hoped that the old relationship was still there, hidden in the hearts of the people of the East, and that this visit would reopen the channel of communication. Asia must seek strength in union, he added, but not in competition with the West in selfishness or brutality. In the autumn of the same year he went to South America and visited Italy on his way back. The growing cult of power, with its increasing tendency towards the mechanization of institutions, and the repression of the human personality stirred him deeply. He gave voice to his protest in a number of lectures and essays at this time, also indirectly in two plays of this period, *Muktadhara* (1922, Waterfall) and *Raktakarabi* (1924, *Red Oleanders*, 1925). In 1926, he went again to Europe and received a warm welcome in Italy as their honoured guest. In spite of his delicate position for having accepted Fascist Italy's hospitality he was unable to give his approval to Italy's political ideal which had declared its acceptance of brute force as the motive power of civilization. He continued his tour in Western and Central Europe, and visited the Balkan States, Turkey, and Egypt in the year 1926. In 1927, Rabindranath visited the Malay States, Java, Bali, and Siam, and revived the ancient cultural bond of India with these countries. In 1929, he attended the Triennial of the National Council of Education of Canada. On his way home from Canada, he visited Indo-China. In 1930–1, in his seventieth year, he again undertook an extensive tour of the West, visiting England, France, Germany, Denmark, Russia, and the United States.

An outcome of Rabindranath's hard work was that many visiting professors in different fields of knowledge came to Visva-Bharati from all over the world during the 1920s and 1930s. Among them were Moritz Winternitz of the Oriental Institute in Prague who was an expert on the *Mahabharata*, archaeologist Sten Konow of Norway, linguist Fernand Benoit of Switzerland, British sociologist Arthur Geddes from France, the painter Andree Karpeles from Paris, European musician Mary van Eeghen of the Netherlands, young art historian Stella Kramrisch from Vienna, Irish poet and writer James Cousins, Sanskrit and Religion scholars Guiseppe Tucci and Carlo Formichi of the University of Rome, Dutch musicologist Arnold Bake, Igor Bogdanov who was an expert in the Persian language, linguist Mark Collins from Ireland, and the Chinese scholar Tan Yun Shan who started Visva-Bharati's centre of Chinese history and culture in 1937 at Santiniketan. There were several others who contributed to the life of the world university. Collaborative research between resident and visiting scholars made an important beginning with editing and compiling the text of the *Mahabharata* as well as in the areas of Indo-Iranian Philology and Islamic Culture. Many lectures were given by visiting scholars on subjects like 'The Vedic Age', 'Buddhism', 'Poetics and the Culture of Asia', 'Indo-Chinese Cultural Contacts', 'Christian Theology', and 'Art History of Europe'. Sanskritist Carlo Formichi lectured on 'The Dynamic Development of the Indian Religions from the Rig Veda to Buddhism' and Sylvain Levi on the 'Contacts between Ancient India and the West'. This was what Rabindranath meant by a meeting of minds across the barriers of East and West. Praising the idealism of men like Leonard Elmhirst who came from England to start Visva-Bharati's village work, Rabindranath wrote,

> A time was when India saw conflict between one race and another, one religion and another. During those medieval times of India's history saints like Ramananda broke through those barriers. They brought races and religions together and tried to bring about unity amongst Hindus and Muslims—so as to be able to deliver them out of the bounds of their narrowness. In Europe today we see conflict among nations. The countries there are torn by repeated wars. As a result some of their men have started coming out into the wider world of humanity leaving behind the boundaries of nationhood and of caste and creed. By and by, we are bound to see a gradual expansion of such humanitarian work in the varied activities of men like Elmhirst. And as we come to know him through his work we shall learn to give him the respect due to him of our own accord.

Along with the visitors from the West, Visva-Bharati was also able to attract to it many men and women from different parts of India during the 1920s and 1930s. Rabindranath travelled extensively also in India,

often with the Santiniketan troupe of dancers and singers, introducing Visva-Bharati to the country. As the nationalist movement spread itself over the country many students left government schools and came to Santiniketan. They came there looking for a 'cultural education'. There were, for example, K.V. Muthuswamy and Mrinalini Sarabhai who came from Madras, Bal Gangadhar Menon who came from Palghat, and Gopala Reddy from Nellore, Mrinalini Sarabhai from Madras where her family were staying at the time, and Indira Gandhi from Allahabad to cite just a few names. Almost all of them came from a nationalist background and were basically seeking a school of Indian culture. As Bal Gangadhar Menon, born 1909, recalled about his admission to Visva-Bharati in 1933: 'I had already taken part in *satyagraha*. After that I could continue my education only in a nationalist institution. Santiniketan and Sabarmati were the only two institutions which came to our mind in this connection. I had heard of many brilliant students who had boycotted government colleges at Gandhiji's call and gone to Sabarmati and Santiniketan and made good. I too had a recommendation to Sabarmati from Kellapan, the father of the nationalist movement in Kerala. But I hankered for a more cultural and philosophical education. So I wrote off myself for admission to Santiniketan supported by my eldest brother.'

Of her circumstances in coming to Santiniketan Indira Gandhi said: 'I was going to a Roman Catholic convent school in Allahabad. I was a misfit there for we were then in the thick of the Nationalist movement—both my parents were in jail—whereas in the school the teachers, students all depended very much on the existence of the British. Although personally they were nice to me I was miserable in the school. They were opposed to Indian festivals, looked upon "holi" as barbarous. I was very anxious to leave and pressed my father to take me out of the convent. I cannot remember now, at this distance of time, whether it was my father or whether it was me who first thought of my going to Santiniketan.'

Indira was taken out of the convent in 1932 and sent to a small homely school in Poona run by the Vakils who were friends of the family. After matriculating from there she went to Santiniketan in 1934. When asked what was distinctive about Santiniketan in her mind Indira Gandhi added, 'It was the totality of the experience and what it helped you to become. Santiniketan revived in me certain traditions which I used to know in my childhood. These traditions which were a very essential part of my grandfather's household at the time of my childhood became a little inconsequential in our own household after my grandfather's death. But when I was in Santiniketan these were revived in me, traditions like observing *Vasant Sri Panchami*. I have observed them in my own life ever

since … . I think what I learnt most at Santiniketan was the ability to live quietly no matter what was happening outside. This has always helped me to survive ... . My grandfather was fond of quoting from a saying of Vivekananda's—"it's what you become more than what you know that is important in life". That is what I felt about Visva-Bharati and Santiniketan.'

Visva-Bharati thrived in the first two decades of its history, during the 1920s and 1930s. Santiniketan became a part of the world community to the extent possible, given its limited resources. After the thirties the visiting scholar programme could not be sustained due to lack of funds. By early 1940 the university showed a deficit of about Rs 30,000. Rabindranath was already very ill at the time. The last years were hard. Another World War had begun which threatened to disturb the peace of the rural hamlet. Rabindranath's last address, read out in his presence on his eightieth birthday on 8 May 1941 was called 'Crisis in Civilisation'. In it he wrote,

> As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere is rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises. A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.

Visva-Bharati must have been his hope for such a future. He left an appeal for its continuation with Mahatma Gandhi with the words,

> Visva-Bharati is like a vessel carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation.

X

His Personal World and His Legacy

I have, it is true, engaged myself in a series of activities. But the inmost me is not to be found in any of these. At the end of the journey I am able to see, a little more clearly, the orb of my life. Looking back, the only thing of which I feel certain is that I am a poet.

I do not claim to be a theologian, a leader of men, a moral or religious preceptor … . Those who try to set me on a pedestal I tell them that I was born with my seat below, on the lap of the earth. In these trees and forests, the dust, earth and grass, have I poured my whole life. Those who are close to the spirit of the earth, those who are made and shaped by her, and who will find their final rest in her, of them all I am the friend, I am the poet.'

Rabindranath Tagore, 1931

We know very little about Rabindranath's personal world. Besides his writings and his paintings, the innumerable letters he wrote are the main source of the documentation on his life. But he said little in them about himself. If he wrote of personal matters they were his observations on what he was doing for the school and for Visva-Bharati, or his feelings about events in the world. The most he revealed about himself was to admit frequently that he was weary and tired, that he needed an 'escape'. His favourite escape was to go and stay in the 'Padma Boat' anchored on the banks of his beloved river Padma in eastern Bengal where his family's agricultural estates were situated. He was a lonely being. He was an important public figure who did not have many friends or followers. Serious admirers yes, harsh critics yes, and a small, though not very significant, group of writers and poets who worshipped his literary style and called themselves *rabindriks* or Tagoreans. There were also non-rabindriks and anti-rabindriks among younger groups of Bengali

poets, those that found his poetry too 'sweet' for their taste. But even they belong to Rabindranath's legacy of a modern consciousness by which the Indian is reconciled with the foreign.

We know from his son's account, called 'Father as I knew him' that all his life he felt an intellectual loneliness. Younger admirers such as the Tagoreans could not give him the companionship or partnership he longed for. But Rathindranath suggests that his father certainly enjoyed their affections. This was specially important for him since he was often the target of acrimonious and even scurrilous attacks from the educated sections of his countrymen on political and literary issues. A large part of the populace never felt that Rabindranath really belonged to them. He was too much at odds with his society: born in an aristocratic family, writing in a style and language which was too individual, a Brahmo or protestant in his religious affiliation, an awesome and revered personality. His closest friend was C.F. Andrews who gave his life to the work in Santiniketan. But, again, Andrews worshipped him, even called him *Gurudev* like the locals. In that sense he could not be a fulfilling companion though he could take on any amount of pain for his friendship. A biography of C.F. Andrews describes his life as 'an ordeal of love' and shows that some of this ordeal was over Rabindranath. The other friend who might have given himself to Rabindranath's cause for life was William Rothenstein. But a time came when Rothenstein distanced himself out of disappointment over his friend's habit of changing decisions all too often causing so much inconvenience to others. Rathindranath writes how unpredictable his father could be in his reactions to men and things and also 'capricious in his moods'. He would change plans within minutes. Apparently, it was an inner voice which made him change course. He wrote about this in an essay in 1903. Quite a number of his poems and songs speak of this trait, of his responses to premonition. Those who were in his close circle saw the results at first hand of last minute postponements and rearrangements of plans.

Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, then a young scientist and the founder of the Indian Statistical Institute, who knew Rabindranath intimately and was often his travelling companion, has written about some of those incidents. About his 1926 Europe tour with the poet Mahalanobis wrote, 'I remember the day, when in 1926, we were to leave Budapest. The first destination was Constantinople, so I reserved berths in the Orient Express going east. After a while he changed his mind for Paris, and so I booked our seats for the Orient Express going west. But Constantinople won again. Luckily the booking office was on the ground floor of our hotel building . . . . Both the Orient Expresses arrive at Budapest at about ten at

night and so we packed up and sat for dinner when somebody came and insisted that the poet must go to Zagreb in his country Croatia. We travelled neither east nor west, but boarded at the last moment the southern train for Zagreb.'

Rathindranath's account, and that of his contemporary Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, both testify that Rabindranath was a most accessible person. There is the same observation about him as a *zamindar* in the Birbhum district gazetteer by Charles O'Malley. He never turned away a tenant or a visitor, he was rarely, if ever, harsh. When shocked over something, such as the death of so many loved people in his life, he turned inward. He did not ever stop work. By his own admission he taught himself to face reality with grace, whether good or evil. He did not keep photographs or souvenirs of those he lost. He wrote poetry about them in giving vent to his feelings. It is on record that once when he saw a picture of his beloved sister-in-law Kadambari, who died young by committing suicide, he addressed a poem to her memory beginning with the words *Tumi ki keboli chhobi* (1915, Are you a mere picture?). Soon after, he wrote a poem invoking Emperor Shahjahan and his Taj Mahal:

> The mausoleum
> Does not stand still
> Lying on the dust of the earth
> Under the shroud of memory tenderly covering death
> Who can withhold life ?
> Her invitation is in world after world
> To ever new sunrise hills, from light to light.
>
> (Mahalanobis, 'Rabindranath Tagore', 1974, p. 6)

That was how he accepted death. There is more personal evidence on this from Mahalanobis who wrote: 'It was in the summer of 1918. His eldest daughter Bela was ill, in the house of her husband Sarat Chandra. The poet was in Jorasanko and every morning I used to take him to visit his daughter. He would go up while I would wait below. The patient was slowly going down. One day, as usual, we went and that day within a few moments he came down and got into the car, and just as I looked at his face he said simply, "she left before I came. They told me as I was going up the stairs and so I came down". While in the car he did not speak. When we reached Jorasanko he said as on other days, "let us go up". After some time he spoke. He said: "After all, I could do nothing. I had known for a long time that she would leave, yet every morning I went and sat with her head on my lap. As in her childhood, during her illness too, she used to say: father, tell me a story. I would tell her whatever would come to my

head. That too is at an end". I asked if there should be any alteration to the arrangements for the day. He said there was no need for that ... . Let me speak of another day. It was August 1932. He was in our Baranagar house. His only grandson Nitu was in England and was very ill. Nitu was his youngest daughter Mira's son. Andrews had taken Mira to England to help her bring Nitu back home. But Nitu died there. When the news came Rabindranath turned so still.' It was at this time that he wrote in a letter to Mira:

In the midst of all our lapses and omissions, all our troubles and sorrows, the major fact is that we have loved. From the outside, the tie may snap, but if we have been deprived of the relation within, then that lack would have been a great void. We have come to our human world. We have been united in many a relationship, and then when the time comes, we have to drift apart. Again and again this has happened and will happen again. Life is fulfilled with this happiness and this sorrow. Whenever there has been a gap in the world of my life, the larger life, I find, exists, it moves, and I must keep step with it with an undisturbed mind ... . I loved Nitu much; besides, for you, an enormous sorrow weighed with me. But one feels ashamed to expose one's sorrow to other's gaze ... there was a suggestion to stop *Barsha-Mangal* in deference to my grief. I said, no, I shall bear my share of grief. (Mahalanobis, 'Rabindranath Tagore', 1974, p. 8)

His overwhelming realisation of the human predicament, both in his own personal life through the experience of the joys and sorrows of life, as well as in what he saw around him, turned him into the novelist of human relations. It led him to grasp the larger potential in the human being through the mingling of hate, love, pain, cruelty and terror. He expressed it all in his literature by immersing himself in a given human situation. In the process he became more truly human than the characters of his novels, plays and short stories. In his personal life he had occasion to face difficult relationships with courage and self-reflection. His critics have asked how he could have given his daughters in marriage when they were so very young. We have on record how he blamed himself when his daughter Mira's marriage failed. He did not hold Mira and her husband responsible for it. This is clear from what Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis wrote to Mira's husband Nagen at the time: 'I have heard of the dissolution of your marriage with mixed feelings. It grieves me very much to think that such a step could not be averted, but in as much as it has become inevitable I am glad that the proceedings are over ... . It is more than seven years ago that he [Rabindranath] first told me about you and Mira. It was the night before the 7th of Pous, and I had gone up to Santiniketan that very evening. The Poet said: "Mira was barely fourteen

when I arranged the match. She was a little child when her mother died. A distant aunt took charge of her. For a long time I had no worries. But one day Pishima came and told me: Mira is growing up. Why don't you think about her marriage? Suddenly I discovered that Mira had grown up into quite a big girl. I did not know what to do with her. I was in a panic. I felt that with my many pre-occupations I would not be able to look after her properly. I thought that the best thing I could do for her would be to get her married. In a great hurry I arranged the marriage. Although Mira looked quite grown up, she was really too young to understand any thing about marriage. I then sent Nagen away to America. When he came back several years later, he was a complete stranger to Mira. I realise that I should never have arranged the marriage in the way I did." ' (Translation mine)

His need to give free expression to his intense experiences also turned him into a painter in his old age. He himself explained why painting was important to him as yet another language of articulation:

> A large part of man can never find its expression in the mere language of words. It must, therefore, seek for its expression other languages—lines and colours, sounds and movements. Through our mastery of these we not only make our whole nature articulate but also understand man in all his attempts to reveal his innermost being in every age and clime … . It is the duty of every human being to master, at least to some extent, not only the language of the intellect, but also the language of the personality which is the language of Art.

The impulse to paint pictures came to him from the corrections he made on his literary manuscripts by doodling over the cancelled portions with a free hand. From those doodles he began to make scribbles. From the scribbles he painted forms and shapes, often with his fingers dipped in ink or colour, or with the ends of pencils. The shapes and forms he painted were of weird men and women, birds and animals, also some landscapes. He continued to paint like this till his death. Most of the forms are distorted, with twists and turns like caricatures, although a few are lyrical like the landscapes he painted. He showed many of the faces as monsters, ghouls, and ghosts, violent and cruel. They are said to bring out the painter's inner sense of discrimination against those people whom he discovered to be tragic figures not growing into humanness through their own faults, such as the authoritarians, the hypocrites, the husbands who tormented their wives, and the women who tormented their daughters-in-law. In his last years the love of image above idea comes through, as though he was representing the human predicament through his new poems in pictures. His paintings and doodles number close to three thousand and most of them are preserved in his archives at Santiniketan.

There are a few more in private collections in India and elsewhere in the world. In Europe, where his paintings were exhibited, the humanists interpreted them as an expression of that part of Rabindranath's inner life which he had suppressed in his role as the mystic from the East.

His legacy is vast, from a great variety of the written form to song and music, to art, to pioneering work in the fields of education and rural reconstruction, and discourses on the nation-state, politics of power, militarism, war, and decay of civilization. It is not easy to measure his legacy because he means different things to different people. But the one thing from his legacy that has enjoyed phenomenal popularity in Bengal are his songs. This is borne out even from very recent experience. All these years Visva-Bharati University held the copyright of his Bengali works. With it, they exercised strict control over the public performance and recording of his songs. With the copyright now gone his songs are seen to have touched the lives and imagination of a much wider circle which also includes 'pop' singers and their various 'bands'. This has been a revelation as his songs have hitherto invariably been presented in a sedate and serene style. The new singers remain loyal of course to the poet's words but are setting them to the popular music of their taste. Rabindranath had predicted that his songs will live after him. 'You cannot find the poet in his biography', he wrote in one of his poems, 'you can find him in his songs'. It is encouraging that the connoisseurs have spread out beyond the classic mode, that they are being creative with his songs.

He lives on in yet another expression of popular participation. His birthday is widely celebrated in Bengal. It is like a festival each year in the schools, colleges, and the street-side youth clubs where children and adults recite his poetry, sing and dance his songs. In that sense he is now 'an artist of the people' even if that has taken the form of a ritual. Through it he lives as the symbol of Bengali cultural pride. Some of his books are sold by the thousands from year to year. Every middle-class Bengali household will routinely possess one or two of his books. Again, with the copyright gone all and sundry are reprinting him by the dozens, some of them cheaply too, in response to the market demand for those books. The Calcutta Book Fair has been a scene of this phenomenon over the last two years since the end of Visva-Bharati's copyright. Also, writing on Rabindranath and discussing his views has certainly been a favourite preoccupation with generations of Bengali intellectuals. Outside of Bengal there are books written on his religion and his philosophy. Most contemporary Indian writers continue to show some curiosity about his work even if they have not been able to enter into his original poetry. Not knowing his language they remain content with knowing him as the poet

of *Gitanjali*. Even without access to his language he is the most widely translated author in contemporary India. The translations are done from the body of his English works. Film-makers in Kolkata and Mumbai continue to make films from his novels and short stories. One cannot say that his paintings are popular but they are certainly of scholarly or esoteric interest to the artist community worldwide.

He is also associated nationally with a modern dance movement which he initiated in Santiniketan for staging his dance dramas as accompaniment to his songs. In some parts of the country he is known particularly for the social change he brought to dance as a popular art form. There is, for example, an institution called The Tagore Academy of Bharatnatyam in Coimbatore. Curious about its name and antecedents I found out that the academy's founder was a man called Laxmanan whom Rabindranath had met on one of his tours of South India in the 1930s. After discovering that Laxmanan belonged to the *devadasi* tradition marginalized by society, Rabindranath extended support from Santiniketan to enable him to start an institution of dance and reinstate the tradition. Hence the academy was named as a tribute to him. Laxmanan's son Rajaram was in charge and he spoke to me about Rabindranath's influence in reviving stage-dancing in South India. Bhagirathi Menon Amma who was a lawyer in Trichur confirmed this. She studied at Visva-Bharati during 1934–6. During my visit she asked her six-year-old granddaughter to dance for me, stating that this would have been unheard of in South India without Rabindranath's and the poet Vallathol's influence. She said that now all the little girls in South Indian homes are sent to dance-schools and credited Rabindranath for that transformation in their society. Rabindranath and Vallathol made a most interesting connection from their two places in Bengal and Kerala where Vallathol founded the Kerala Kalamandalam. It was in the 1820s that they simultaneously, but independently, began their work of reviving classical dance. Vallathol came to Santiniketan in 1934 with his troupe from the Kerala Kalamandalam to dance for Rabindranath.

There lies another clue to his legacy. To some he came close in straight and simple ways which touched their lives and advanced their thinking. Another oral record makes sense in this context. A Santiniketan alumnus K.V. Muthuswamy of Coimbatore, had been a student of Visva-Bharati at the Kala-Bhavana from 1938 to 1944. He went to Annie Besant's school in Madanapalli till the school was closed down because of her internment. Muthuswamy was only in the fourth grade then. At the time he did not go to any other school. Some years later his father sent him to study art in Santiniketan. On finishing his art studies at Santiniketan he joined Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra as an art teacher but left after a year.

He did not take up any employment again. He believed that his Santiniketan education influenced him to be less ambitious, it changed his attitude of mind. The family had a farm and he was happy to work on the farm for the rest of his life. He believed he obtained that state of mind from Rabindranath's educational ideal: to work with the tillers of the soil with understanding for their hardships. He was never dissatisfied with his life, he said.

We know that Rabindranath was dedicated to nurturing the individual's potential and also to creating human sympathy through his educational ideal. In an important sense Muthuswamy actually experienced that ideal in the way he lived. I can imagine there are or were a few more individuals of that kind. Yet there are so many others who do not think that Rabindranath's ideals of religion and nationality, education and society, progress and culture, can be real. Not surprisingly, there is no uniform response to him. The problem lies to some extent in our inability to relate to his concept of 'wholeness' in the development of man's potential. He wrote,

> In modern society the ideal of wholeness has lost its force.

His words are borne out by the fact that even now Santiniketan and Sriniketan are not integrated. Rural Sriniketan considers itself dominated by Santiniketan. There is a different atmosphere in the two places, yet they are physically situated within two miles of each other. It is as if Santiniketan has become 'urban' while Sriniketan remains 'rustic'. The institutions of Santiniketan brought cultural enrichment to the elite; but the village hardly changed.

Reading Rabindranath's analytical essays side by side with his creative works leads us to believe that his convictions came from the core of his personal experience. That experience found its consummation in his feelings for the miseries of his fellow human beings and in taking what action was possible for him single-handedly. Born to an exceptional family and himself blessed with great gifts of mind and heart he lived life to the full in its great joys and also its intense sufferings. That is why his works are expressions of the human condition of happiness and pain. The poet of the devotional *Gitanjali* lyrics also wrote the following unhappy verse:

> In the words of blood I saw
> My being.
> I knew myself
> Through hurts
> And pain.
> Truth is hard

And never deceives.
I loved that hardness.
(Sisir Kumar Das, 'Keynote Address' in Chaudhuri and Subramanyan, eds, *Rabindranath Tagore*, 1988, p. 18)

I agree with what the scholar-critic Sisir Kumar Das wrote about this particular verse: 'This is also Tagore, not so popular, nonetheless real and true, as real and true as the Tagore who created a world of the eerie and the bizarre, the distorted and the dark apparitions in the paintings. The poet of *Gitanjali* is not the only Tagore; the true Tagore is a constantly emerging and enlarging self; there is not one but a garland of Rabindranaths'.

It has been said of Rabindranath by the younger generation of modernist Bengali poets that he was averse to the consciousness of evil. They have compared his work with Baudelaire's poetry and found him wanting. Even W.B. Yeats made this suggestion after the euphoria with the *Gitanjali* was over. The question raised was whether he saw the good and the beautiful as something independent of any encounter with evil and the grotesque. Or did he exclude the reality of such an encounter from his poetry altogether? Their point was that he saw the world as simply good and beautiful, like 'the well-run kingdom of a benevolent God', so much so that the sinful side of things escaped him.

It is fair to suggest that Rabindranath held firm to his faith in the beauty and sublimity of life. But that is not to say what the younger poets have said that he did not suffer any anguish, that he gave no space to anguish in his poetry. He felt guilty that millions of his countrymen had to be so weighed down by their daily miseries to feel any beauty whatsoever in life. He was restless over the social injustice that prevailed, and felt circumscribed by the fact that he was not able to really reach out to the common people, the peasant, the potter, the weaver, the fisherman. In his poem 'How little I know of this world', written in the last year of his life, he wrote,

Come poet of the multitudes,
sing songs of obscure man,
reveal his unspoken soul,
soothe his humiliated heart,
restore life and song
to this dry land.
Resuscitate the failing hearts
of hidden men.
May your voice reflect
those standing bowed.

Let the one-stringed minstrel, also,
add his tune
to the great court anthem of the muse.
Come, poet of the new age,
lead me to those hearts
so far away, those hearts so near.
May they know themselves through you
whom I salute.
(Roy and Chakravarty, trans. in *A Tagore Reader*, ed., Chakravarty, 1966, p. 367)

A keen sense of his own failing perhaps made him so utterly sensitive and sympathetic to Gandhi's cause and so full of hope for Gandhi as a leader of the Indian masses. The hero of his play *Prayaschitta* (1909,Atonement) was a saintly rebel called 'Dhananjaya' who argues for the need for *chittasuddhi* or atonement by means of moral reparation and the removal of untouchability. This play was an early expression of Rabindranath's sense of guilt. That sense of guilt and failure was there with greater force in his later poetry. A poem with the title 'On that birthday morning' from his collection called *Janmadine* (1941,On my birthday) reads as follows:

On that birthday morning,
With deference
I lifted my eyes to the sunshine.
I saw the dawn
Consecrate
The white forehead of the mountain ranges.
I beheld
The great distance
In creation's heart
On the throne of the lord of mountains.
From ages, majestic,
He has preserved the unknown
In the trackless forest;
The sky-cleaving, far-away,
Encircled
In sunrise and sunset.
On this birthday,
The great distance grows in my heart.
The starry path is nebular,
Mysterious;
And my remoteness impenetrable.
The pilgrim moves, his path unseen,
The consequence unknown.

Today
I hear that traveller's footsteps
From my lonely seashore.
(Chakravarty, trans. in *A Tagore Reader*, ed., Chakravarty, 1966, pp. 368–9)

I believe that if we can inwardly relate to this poem we shall find he is there as a friend in our lives helping us to live with honesty in our weaknesses and our strengths. There was not a great deal he or any one individual could do to bring change to an unequal and unjust world. But he was never indifferent to the need, and he tried hard to make a difference with whatever constructive work was possible for him. That can be his legacy in our individual lives.

Appendix

Select Letters of Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath wrote, and received, a very large number of letters. His correspondence was international. There are close to six thousand letters in the Rabindra-Bhavana archives of Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan written by him. Some of them are copies but many are originals which have been given to the archives over the years by the recipients. A majority of these are unpublished. His letters range over an enormous variety of subjects, from politics to education to ideas of civilization, and his general feeling about life and nature. I am selecting a few letters relating to the dominant theme of this short biography, which is about him as a man of action in building his school, rural centre, and university called Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan-Sriniketan. As this work was centred on his own individual and rebel approach to Swadeshi and Nationalism, on his perceptions of what was good for his country and what was wrong with his society, I have included letters on those subjects. They form the backdrop to his Santiniketan school and Visva-Bharati. In selecting these few letters to represent his feelings and his thoughts I have confined myself to his letters in English so as to represent him in his own words. As is to be expected most of his correspondence was in Bengali, but there are a considerable number that he wrote in English.

On one occasion Rabindranath wrote to W.B.Yeats that his letters 'act like a footpath' in his 'life history', 'unconsciously laid by the treading of my thoughts'.

A lawyer from New York by the name of Myron H. Phelps was an advocate for Indian freedom and had written a series of letters to *The Hindu* newspaper of Madras called 'Letters to the Indian people'. He also

wrote letters to individuals like Rabindranath Tagore asking for support in his cause. Rabindranath however was more concerned with the divisive forces of his society than with the absence of political freedom. He argued that though India would become a sovereign state if the goal of political freedom is pursued at the cost of all else, her political freedom would be difficult to sustain without a solution of her social problems. He was desperately anxious about the apathy of his society to change, and the complete domination of the lower classes by the upper classes which kept the people separated and weak. He held firmly to the position that overcoming our weakness was more urgent than the pursuit of political independence. This letter to Myron H. Phelps was written in response to a letter from Phelps about the Indian situation and spells out Rabindranath's views on the subject.

To Myron H. Phelps, Santiniketan, 4 January 1909.

My dear Sir,

I am exceedingly gratified to receive your very kind letter and to know of your desire for our welfare.

In regard to the assistance you expect from me, I am afraid that as I have never been used to express myself in the English language I shall not be able to give an adequate or effective idea of what I feel to be the truth about our country. However, I shall attempt as best I may to give you an outline of my views, more as a response to your message of goodwill than with the hope of rendering any help in your friendly endeavours.

One need not dive deep, it seems to me, to discover the problem of India; it is so plainly evident on the surface. Our country is divided by numberless differences—physical, social, linguistic, religious; and this obvious fact must be taken into account in any course which is destined to lead us into our own place among the nations who are building up the history of man. The trite maxim 'History repeats itself' is like most other sayings but half the truth. The conditions which have prevailed in India from a remote antiquity have guided its history along a particular channel, which does not and cannot coincide with the lines of evolution taken by other countries under different sets of influences. It would be a sad misreading of the lessons of the past to apply our energies to tread too closely in the footsteps of any other nation, however successful in its own career. I feel strongly that our country has been entrusted with a message which is not a mere echo of the living voices that resound from Western shores, and to be true to her trust she must realise the divine purpose that has been manifest throughout the history; she must become conscious of the situation she has been instrumental in creating—of its meaning and possibilities.

It has never been India's lot to accept alien races as factors in her civilisation.

You know very well how the caste that proceeds from colour takes elsewhere a most virulent form. I need not cite modern instances of the animosity which divides white men from negroes in your own country, and excludes Asiatics from European colonies. When, however, the white-skinned Aryans on encountering the dark aboriginal races of India found themselves face to face with the same problem, the solution of which was neither extermination, as has happened in America and Australia, or a modification in the social system of the superior race calculated to accommodate the inferior without the possibility of either friction or fusion, they chose the latter. Now the principle underlying this choice obviously involves mechanical arrangement and juxtaposition, not cohesion and amalgamation. By making very careful provision for the differences, it keeps them ever alive. Unfortunately, the principle once accepted inevitably grows deeper and deeper into the constitution of the race even after the stress of the original necessity ceases to exist.

Thus secure in her rigid system of seclusion, in the very process of inclusion, India in different periods of her history received with open arms the medley of races that poured in on her without any attempt at shutting out undesirable elements. I need not dwell at length on the evils of the resulting caste system. It cannot be denied, and this is a fact which foreign onlookers too often overlook, that it served a very useful purpose in its day and has even up to a late age, been of immense protective benefit to India. It was largely attributed to the freedom from narrowness and intolerance which distinguishes the Hindu religion and has enabled races with widely different culture and even antagonistic social and religious usages and ideals to settle down peaceably side by side—a phenomenon which cannot fail to astonish Europeans, who, with comparatively less jarring elements, have struggled for ages to establish peace and harmony among themselves. But this very absence of struggle, developing into a ready acquiescence in any position assigned by the social system, has crushed individual manhood and has accustomed us for centuries not only to submit to every form of domination, but sometimes actually to venerate the power that holds us down. The assignment of the business of government almost entirely to the military class reacted upon the whole social organism by permanently excluding the rest of the people from all political cooperation, so that now it is hardly surprising to find the almost entire absence of any feeling of common interest, any sense of national responsibility, in the general consciousness of a people of whom as a whole it has seldom been any part of their pride, their honour, their dharma, to take thought or stand up for their country. This completeness of stratification, this utter submergence of the lower by the higher, this immutable or all-pervading system, has no doubt imposed a mechanical uniformity upon the people but has at the same time kept their different sections inflexibly and unalterably separate, with the consequent loss of all power of adaptation and readjustment to new conditions and forces. The regeneration of the Indian people, to my mind, directly and perhaps solely depends upon the removal of

this condition. Whenever I realise the hypnotic hold which this gigantic system of cold-blooded repression has taken on the minds of our people whose social body it has so completely entwined in its endless coils that the free expression of manhood even under the direst necessity has become almost an impossibility, the only remedy that suggests itself to me and which even at the risk of uttering a truism I cannot but repeat, is—to educate them out of their trance.

I know I shall be told that foreign dominion is also one of the things not conducive to the free growth of manhood. But it must be remembered that with us foreign dominion is not an excrescence the forcible extirpation of which will restore a condition of normal health and vigour. It has manifested itself as a political symptom of our social disease, and at present it has become necessary to us for effecting the dispersal of all internal obstructive agencies. For we have now come under the domination not of a dead system, but of a living power, which, while holding us under subjection, cannot fail to impart to us some of its own life. This vivifying warmth from outside is gradually making us conscious of our own vitality and the newly awakened life is making its way slowly, but surely, even through the barriers of caste.

The mechanical incompatibility and consequent friction between the American colonies and the parent country was completely done away with by means of a forcible severance. The external force which in eighteenth-century France stood to divide class from class [could] only be overcome by *vis major* to bring emancipation to a homogeneous people. But here in India are working deep-seated social forces, complex internal reactions, for in no other country under the sun has such a juxtaposition of races, ideas and religions occurred; and the great problem which from time immemorial India has undertaken to solve is what in the absence of a better name may be called the race problem. At the sacrifice of her own political welfare she has through long ages borne this great burden of heterogeneity, patiently working all the time to evolve out of these warring contradictions a great synthesis. Now has come the time when she must begin to build, and dead arrangement must gradually give away to living construction, organic growth. If at this stage vital help has come from the West even in the guise of an alien rule, India must submit—nay welcome it, for above all she must achieve her life's work.

She must take it as a significant fact in her history that when on the point of being overcome with a torpor that well nigh caused her to forget the purpose of what she had accomplished, a rude shock of life should have thus burst in upon her reminding her of her mission and giving her strength to carry it on. It is now manifestly her destiny that East and West should find their meeting place in her ever-hospitable bosom. The unification of the East which has been her splendid if unconscious achievement must now be consciously realised in order that the process may be continued with equal success and England's contribution thereto utilised to full advantage.

For us, there can be no question of blind revolution, but of steady and

purposeful education. If to break up the feudal system and the tyrannical conventionalism of the Latin church which had outraged the healthier instincts of humanity, Europe needed the thought impetus of the Renaissance and the fierce struggle of the Reformation, do we not in a greater degree need an overwhelming of higher social ideals before a place can be found for true political thinking? Must we not have that greater vision of humanity which will impel us to shake off the fetters that shackle our individual life before we begin to dream of national freedom?

It must be kept in mind, however, that there never has been a time when India completely lost sight of the need of such reformation. In fact she had no other history but the history of this social education. In the earliest dawn of her civilisation there appeared amidst the fiercest conflict of races, factions and creeds, the genius of Ramachandra and Krishna introducing a new epoch of unification and tolerance and allaying the endless struggle of antagonism. India has ever since accepted them as the divine will incarnate, because in their life and teachings her innermost truth has taken an immortal shape. Since them all the illustrious names of our country have been of those who came to bridge over the differences of colours and scriptures and to recognise all that is highest and best as the common heritage of humanity. Such have been our emperors Asoka and Akbar, our philosophers Shankara and Ramanuja, our spiritual masters Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya and others not less glorious because knit closer to us in time and perspective. They belong to various sects and castes, some of them of the very 'lowest', but still they occupy the ever-sacred seat of the guru, which is the greatest honour that India confers on her children. This shows that even in the darkest of her days the consciousness of her true power and purpose has never forsaken her.

The present unrest in India of which various accounts must have reached you, is to me one of the most hopeful signs of the times. Different causes are assigned and remedies proposed by those whose spheres of activity necessarily lead them to a narrow and one-sided view of the situation. From my seclusion it seems to me clear, that it is not this or that measure, this or that instance of injustice or oppression, which is at the bottom. We have been on the whole comfortable with a comfort unknown for a long time, we have peace and protection and many of the opportunities for prosperity which these imply. Why then this anguish at heart? Because the contact of East and West has done its work and quickened the dormant life of our soul. We have begun to be dimly conscious of the value of the time we have allowed to slip by, of the weight of the clogging effete matter which we have allowed to accumulate, and are angry with ourselves. We have also begun vaguely to realise the failure of England to rise to the great occasion, and to miss more and more the invaluable cooperation which it was so clearly England's mission to offer. And so we are troubled with a trouble which we know not yet how to name. How England can best be made to perceive that the mere establishment of the Pax Britannica cannot either justify or make possible her continued dominion, I have no idea; but of this I am sure that

the sooner we come to our senses, and take up the broken thread of our appointed task, the earlier will come the final consummation.

With kindest regards,

Yours sincerely,

Rabindranath Tagore.

One of the aspects of the British connection with India that Rabindranath valued greatly was the influence of English literature on the modern Indian mind. This letter to Sturge Moore is a reiteration of that position and, as in the previous letter, it reflects what he ideally wanted for his country. Thomas Sturge Moore was one of Rabindranath's intimate circle of friends in London who was closely associated with the India Society publication of the *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* in 1913.

To Thomas Sturge Moore, Santiniketan, 1 May 1914.

My dear Sturge Moore,

Our school is closed, and after a long interval of busy time a full day has been given to me to spend as I like. I took up your book, *The Sea is Kind*, finishing it at one sitting. It will be difficult for you to imagine this blazing summer sky of ours with hot blasts of air repeatedly troubling the fresh leaves of a tree whose name will be of no use to you. This is as unlike the climate and the country where your poems were written as anything could be. I feel your environments in your poems. There is in them the reticence of your sky, the compactness of your indoor life and the general consciousness of strength ready to defy fate. Here in the East the transparent stillness of our dark nights, the glare of the noonday sun melting into a tender haze in the blue distance, the plaintive music of the life that feels itself afloat in the Endless, seem to whisper into our hearts some great secret of existence which is uncommunicable.

All the same, nay, all the more, your literature is precious to us. The untiring hold upon life which you never lose, the definiteness of your aims and the positive reliance you have upon things present before you, inspire us with a strong sense of reality which is so much needed both for the purposes of art and of life. Literature of a country is not chiefly for home consumption. Its value lies in the fact that it is imperatively necessary for the lands where it is foreign. I think it has been the good fortune of the West to have the opportunity of absorbing the spirit of the East through the medium of the Bible. It has added to the richness of your life because it is alien to your temperament. In course of time you may discard some of the doctrines and teachings but it has done its work—

it has created a bifurcation in your mental system which is so needful for all life growth. The Western literature is doing the same with us, bringing into our life elements some of which supplement and some contradict our tendencies. This is what we need.

It is not enough to charm or surprise us—we must receive shocks and be hurt. Therefore we seek in your writings not simply what is artistic but what is vivid and forceful. That is why Byron had such an immense influence over our youths of the last generation. Shelley, in spite of his vague idealism, roused our minds because of his fanatic impetuosity which is born of a faith in life. What I say here is from the point of view of a foreigner. We cannot but miss a great deal of the purely artistic element in your literature but whatever is broadly human and deeply true can be safely shipped for distant times and remote countries. We look for your literature to bring to us the thundering life blood of the West, even though it carries with it all the debris of the passing moments.

I am getting ready to go off to the hills to spend my vacation there.

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath could never reconcile his appreciation of English literature and of the West's ideas of humanism to the evils of British imperialism. He had once written to his friend and biographer Edward J. Thompson, 'Indeed it is a great pity that the Europeans have come to us as Imperialists rather than as Christians and so have deprived our people with their true contact with the religion of Jesus Christ. A few individuals like C.F. Andrews, whom we have known as the true followers of their Teacher, have created in us a respect for Christianity which the most brutal lathi charges, shootings and detentions without trial of the British Government in India have failed totally to dissipate'. Rabindranath repudiated his knighthood to protest against British brutality on Indian protestors at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. This was the letter he wrote to the Viceroy of India in the matter.

To Lord Chelmsford, Calcutta, 31 May 1919.

Your Excellency,

The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted upon the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilised governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent

and remote. Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organisation for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification. The accounts of insults and sufferings undergone by our brothers in the Punjab have trickled through the gagged silence, reaching every corner of India, and the universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of our people has been ignored by our rulers—possibly congratulating themselves for what they imagine as salutary lessons. This callousness has been praised by most of the Anglo-Indian papers, which have in some cases gone to the brutal length of making fun of our sufferings, without receiving the least check from the same authority—relentlessly careful in smothering every cry of pain and expression of judgement from the organs representing the sufferers. Knowing that our appeals have been in vain and that the passion of vengeance is blinding the nobler vision of statesmanship in our Government, which could so easily afford to be magnanimous as befitting its physical strength and moral tradition, the very least I can do for my country is to take all consequences upon myself in giving voice to the protest of millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguish of terror. The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings.

These are the reasons which have painfully compelled me to ask Your Excellency, with due deference and regret, to relieve me of my title of Knighthood, which I had the honour to accept from His Majesty the King at the hands of your predecessor, for whose nobleness of heart I still entertain great admiration.

Yours faithfully,

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath abhorred the politics of divisive forces. He grew increasingly bitter over British rule and their display of power. He did not subscribe to nationalism either and was one of its vocal and constant critics. He held the West responsible for spreading the cult of nationalism in the world through war and conquest. He greatly admired his English friends but, by his own admission, found himself feeling extremely constrained by the presence of the British government in India. In the letters that follow he speaks out his heart to William Rothenstein, the prime mover of Rabindranath's career in the West, to whom he wrote on receiving news of the Nobel prize, 'I felt certain that of all my friends none would be more glad at this news than you'. His letters below illustrate what he thought about nationalism and Western aggression.

To William Rothenstein, Shantiniketan, 26 October 1917.

My dearest friend,

It has given me deep pleasure to know that my last three books you like. I had my fear. I had my fear that my American lectures, especially those about nationalism, might give offence to my readers in England. Possibly to some extent they have done so. But most of the reviews that I have seen in your papers are extremely mild. Some critics have taxed me with having misunderstood the meaning of the word "Nation". I suppose it is one of those words whose meaning is still in its process of formation. If you really mean by that word the peoples who have the consciousness of a common tradition and aspiration then why do you exclude us Bengalis from its category? For you are never tired of reminding us that we do not belong to a nation. When we try to understand you we find that our tradition and aspiration are of a different character from yours—it is more religious and social than political. Therefore it seems to me that the word nation in its meaning carries a special emphasis upon its political character. Politics becomes aggressively self-conscious when it sets itself in antagonism against other peoples, specially when it extends its dominion among alien races. This convulsive intensity of consciousness is productive of strength but not of health. The rapid growth of nationalism in Europe begins with her period of foreign exploration and exploitation. Its brilliance shines in contrast upon the dark background of the subjection of other peoples. Certainly it is based upon the idea of competition, conflict and conquest and not that of cooperation. In human language there are very few words that have an absolute meaning. The unselfish people have not completely lost their self, only the selfish ones put stronger emphasis upon it and thus have a special designation. And the people with an aggressively emphatic politics is a nation. The man in his professional character has very often a special attitude of mind. There he feels an intense satisfaction if he can sell a lame horse at a price which is dear even for a sound one. Because in profession man has no other object before him but success. He may have an exalted standard of life in his private capacity and yet as a professional man his conduct may go entirely against that standard, without disturbing his appetite for dinner. Therefore it is not extraordinary to find rapacious landlords who are extravagant in their generosity. That grasping professional attitude of mind makes a nation of a people when it furiously pursues success and takes it to be a sign of sentimentalism to budge an inch from its reckless path of power at the dictates of humanity. What I have said in my lectures is that such an attitude of mind in a whole people of a country, such constant self idolatry by all kinds of ritualism and human sacrifice must go against moral providence of the world ending at last in a catastrophe.

By some unexpected freak of fate I was caught in a dust storm of our politics. I have just come out of it nearly choked to death. I am more convinced than ever that a poet might do worse than write mere verses. Try to be true to yourself by

all means but not to be truer which is a hollow temptation set in our path by moral teachers.

Give my love to dear children and tell them not to grow too fast before I come to see them. Because that will be unfair to me who can only grow older without growing at all.

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

To William Rothenstein, Brussels, 6 October 1920.

Dearest friend,

The continual enjoyment of sympathy and fellowship with which I have been surrounded since I came to the Continent makes it so difficult for me to sit down and write letters. I can hardly realise how it has become possible for me to have occupied the hearts of these people to which I could only find access through a very meagre and imperfect medium of translation. The welcome which has been accorded to me in all the countries that I have travelled in Europe has been deeply genuine and generous to the extreme. This makes it delightfully easy for me to give out the best that I have in me in an easy flow of communication. For a literary man the greatest joy is in the expression of his personality. It is a light which shines in its perfection of truth only where the atmosphere is transparent. I feel it clear that my relationship with the Continental Europe is natural and unobstructed, being disinterested. In England, I have distinctly felt in my last visit, it is obscured owing, I am sure, to the politics that ever stands between our people and yours, consciously or unconsciously. I have nothing to do directly with politics. I am not a Nationalist, moderate or immoderate in my political doctrine or aspiration. But politics is not a mere abstraction, it has its personality and it *does* intrude into my life where I am human. It kills and maims individuals, it tells lies, it uses its sacred sword of justice for the purpose of massacre, it spreads misery broadcast over centuries of exploitation, and I cannot say to myself, 'Poet, you have nothing to do with these facts, for they belong to politics'. This politics assumes its fullest diabolical aspect when I find all its hideous acts of injustice to find moral support from a whole nation only because it wants to enjoy in comfort and safety the golden fruits reaped from abject degradation of human races. What hurts me most is the fact that your people are ready to judge others while they shield themselves from the judgement of history by all means of moral camouflage, by obliteration of evidence of misdeeds with scientific efficiency and farsightedness which were not within the means of our former rulers. But all the same judgement will come when the time is ripe; and because your politicians are conscious of that fact they are nervously busy in tightening their grasp upon the present situation, thinking that by doing so they will keep

the future as their captive. I am sorry to be writing in this vein, but, I suppose, evil has its terrible fascination, and I cannot help reading newspapers in which the organised hooliganism of the Military Government in Ireland is daily being revealed and I daily wonder how can a Nation allow such things to pass or try to seek a comfortable hiding place for its conscience behind thick walls of hypocrisy and suppression of truth. It makes me almost physically ill and feel ashamed of comfort and freedom which as an individual I am allowed to enjoy. You have read the Esher Commission report and you know what it is going to be for our unfortunate country. More army, more expenditure, more taxation when the cost of living has risen higher than two hundred percent. This will make your Reform Bill a cruel mockery for us. It is merely sweeping away the very little money that the country has and then leave to her all the bills of the cost of education and other vital necessaries, to pay. The mockery will grow in cruelty enormously when after a few years you will blame us for not carrying out any constructive programme satisfactorily though opportunity was given. All this politics means untold misery to a people held forcibly fixed to a state of helplessness for all time to come. But you must know that the downfall of your Empire is imminent when the moral downfall of your people is proceeding in a rapid pace. It is right and natural that you will put more and more faith upon brute force for holding together your unwieldy Empire, making it so monstrously ugly that the whole outraged world will pull it down in disgust. Your bloated prosperity is a barrier that prevents you to see what bearers of doom are silently marshalling their forces against you till the sudden signal is given from the dark.

I hope you will be able to make allowance for any bitterness in my language in this letter which may seem to you as unwarrantable.

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

To Jawaharlal Nehru, [? place], 17 July 1939.

My dear Jawaharlal,

Amiya [Chakravarty] has just been telling me about his talks with you and giving me some details regarding your impending visit to China. As to the present crisis in the Congress I fully share your deep concern at the turn that affairs have taken; I have no doubt also that the creative forces of our nation will pass this test and come out stronger after the main issues have been clarified even if we have to pass through a temporary phase of painful adjustment.

My warmest good wishes are with you in your mission of good neighbourliness to China. I feel proud that the new spirit of Asia will be represented through you and our best traditions of Indian humanity find their voice during your contacts with the people of China. My tours in the Far East have convinced me that that in the main our peoples have maintained an Asiatic tradition of cultural inter-

change: we have not fought with each other in the name of hungry nationalism as the Western countries have been doing in Europe. Japanese aggression, therefore, seems to be essentially a case of borrowed pugnacity which, I am sure has not touched the deep heart of their people. Let Japan take warning not to betray the basis of her civilisation which she shares with China and with us in India; far greater than the fearful she is inflicting on China would be the inevitable wrecking of her own humanity which her militants seem determined to achieve.

I would request you to include Japan in your itinerary: India will be with you in your appeal to the moral conscience of Asia which Japan cannot afford to kill in a mania of spiritual suicide. The pathway which led from India to her great neighbours in the East is now partly closed through centuries of neglect; we have to remove the weeds, and also the recent barriers erected by fratricidal politics so that once more the traffic of human interchange can continue, linking our country with Japan and China. India's great awakening had crossed deserts and mountains, the overflow of her glorious epoch of culture touched far continents and left permanent deposits in distant shores of Asia. In my visits to China and Japan, and to Siam, Java and Bali, I felt profoundly moved to find how the communion of her cultures persisted even up to our own days and I cannot help hoping that as a messenger from India's youth you would give strength to the historic forces of Asiatic unity, bringing new urge of neighbourly understanding to our Eastern peoples. India herself is passing through an eclipse when her own reality is lost to her in a haze of parochial politics, sectarianism, and domestic contention: contact with a greater world of Eastern culture will, I fervently hope, help in removing her obsessions and enliven her national existence with a new humanity.

With my affectionate regards,

Yours sincerely,

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath resolved his inner turmoil again and again by turning to his educational work in the service of his country. He did so when he left the Swadeshi Movement of 1904–5 and returned to the work for his school in Santiniketan. In disillusionment; again, out of the misery of the world war of 1914–18, he proceeded step by step to the one fixed purpose of gradually forming at Santiniketan a centre called Visva-Bharati where East and West would meet in a common fellowship of study and work. He wanted to serve humanity by throwing open the doors of Santiniketan to those who believed in peace and goodwill, in East and West alike, to come together, on equal terms, without distinction of caste or creed or race, and away from politics. He believed this to be a 'divine' task for which he was the 'chosen' instrument. The letters that follow to

W.W. Pearson and C.F. Andrews, both of whom lived and worked in Santiniketan, have their focus on his Santiniketan endeavour.

To W.W. Pearson, Urbana, Illinois, 15 January 1913.

Dear friend,

Your letter has stirred my heart to its depths, it has made the morning light brighter for me and wafted the breath of peace from our Santiniketan ashram into my room in this American boarding house. It has been doubly welcome to me owing to other letters brought by the same mail complaining of the financial difficulties of our school. But God gives infinitely more than he claims and it is with a feeling of gladness I am preparing myself for more sacrifice. Your letter had largely contributed to that gladness of spirit, and I feel so thankful for it! My visit to Europe had enlarged my life in more ways than one but the best things I have gained there are friends whose love helps me in my life. I feel I have known you all my days and the light of our love will ever become brighter in days to come and help us to our way to God.

I am looking forward to the time when I shall meet you in India and take up the same mission of spiritual service.

Most sincerely yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

To W.W. Pearson, [? place], 8 August 1913.

Dear friend,

Our people are in danger of forgetting that God's love like his rivers, flows from the East as well as the West. We are apt to think that it is only a kind of historical nor'wester that has burst upon us from the West—the terrible rush of the powerful into the Vacuum Created by the Weak. It has been given to you my friend, to bring to us the glad assurance that God's love has its living source in the West also. Witness of this love are needed much more than dispenses of social benefit, political rights and administrative efficiency. People lay more stress upon preaching doctrines than giving love and its effect is like having strong winds without getting a drop of rain. Very often winds carry seeds but of what use are they when there is this delight. "Love is enough"—it contains everything that is needed. This precious gift you have brought to our boys unasked and they will never forget it in their lives. It will open their hearts and will make them ready to receive the best that the West can give them.
My pronams and love to you.

Yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

To C.F. Andrews, Near Paris, 20 August 1920.

Dear friend,

We are in a delightful country, in a delightful place in France, meeting with people who are so human.

I feel clearly that the ultimate reality of man's life is his life in the world of ideas, where he is emancipated from gravitational pull of the dust and he realises that he is spirit. We, in India, live in a narrow cage of petty interests; we do not believe that we have wings, for we have lost our sky; we chatter and hop and peck at one another within the small range of our obstructed opportunities. It is difficult to achieve greatness of mind and character where our responsibility is diminutive and fragmentary, where our whole life occupies and affects extremely limited area.

And yet through the cracks and chinks of our walls we must send our starved branches to the sunlight and air, and the roots of our life must pierce the upper strata of our soil of desert sands till they reach down to the spring of water which is exhaustless. Our most difficult problem is how to gain our freedom of soul in spite of the cramped condition of our outward circumstances; how to ignore the perpetual insult of our destiny, so as to be able to uphold the dignity of man.

Santiniketan is for this *tapasya* of India. We who have come there often forget the greatness of our mission, mostly because of the obscurity and insignificance with which the humanity of India seems to be obliterated. We have not the proper light and perspective in our surroundings to be able to realise that our soul is great; and therefore we behave as if we were doomed to be small for all time.

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

To C.F. Andrews, Paris, 7 September 1920.

Dear friend,

Your letters always bring the atmosphere of Santiniketan round my mind, with all its colour and sounds and movements; and my love for my boys, like a migratory bird, crosses back over the sea, seeking its own dear nest in the Ashram. Your letters are great gifts to me—I have not the power to repay them in kind. For now my mind faces the West, and all that it has to give naturally flows towards it. Therefore, for the time being, my direct communication with you has become thin, like the stream of the Kopai river in the summer. But I know Santiniketan will not bring forth its fullness of flower and fruit if, through me, it does not send its roots into the Western soil. Stung by the insult of cruel injustice, we try to repudiate Europe, but by doing so we insult ourselves. Let us

have the dignity not to quarrel or retaliate; not to pay back smallness by being small ourselves. This is the time when we should dedicate all our resources of emotion, thought and character to the service of our country in a positive direction of duty. We are suffering because of our offences against Shivam, against Advaitam. We spend all our energy in quarrelling with the punishment and nothing of it is left for the reparation of wrongs we have done and are doing. When we have performed our part of the duties, we shall have the fullest right and power and time to bring others to book for their transgressions.

Let us forget the Punjab affairs—but never forget that we shall go on deserving such humiliation over and over again until we set our own house in order. Do not mind the waves of the sea, but mind the leaks in your vessel. Politics in our country is extremely petty. It has a pair of legs, one of which has shrunk and shrivelled and become paralytic and therefore feebly waits for the other one to drag it on. There is no harmony between the two, and our politics, in its hoppings and totterings and falls, is comic and undignified. The entreaty and anger, which alternately are struggling to find expression in the ludicrously lame member of this tragic partnership, both belong to our abject partnership, both belong to our abject feebleness. When Non-cooperation comes naturally as our final moral protest against the unnaturalness of our political situation, then it will be glorious, because true; but when it is only another form of begging, then let us reject it.

The establishment of perfect co-operation of life and mind among ourselves must come first through sacrifice and self-dedication, and then will come in its natural course the non-cooperation. When the fruit completely ripens, it finds its freedom through its own fulfillment of truth.

Our country is crying to her own children for their co-operation in the removal of obstacles in our social life which for centuries have been hampering us in our self-realisation. We need co-operation in the sacrifice of love, more than anything else, to prove to our country that she is ours; and then, we shall have the moral right to say to others: 'we have nothing to do with you in our affairs'. And for this, all the moral fervour which the life of Mahatma Gandhi represents, and which he, of all men in the world, can call up, is needed.

That such a precious treasure of power should be put into the mean and frail vessel of our politics, allowing it to sail across endless waves of angry recrimination, is terribly unfortunate for our country, when our mission is to revive the dead with the fire of the soul. The external waste of our resources of life is great owing to external circumstances; but that the waste of our spiritual resources should also be allowed to happen on adventures that are wrong from the point of view of moral truth is heartbreaking. It is criminal to turn moral force into a blind force.

Our time to go to Holland is drawing near. I have numerous invitations from over there to lecture, but I am not yet fully ready. Just now I am busy writing. My

subject is the Meeting of the East and West. I hope it will be finished before I leave Paris.

With love,

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath endeavoured to reach a larger humanity in his own country too. His rural work involved the villages, first, in his family's agricultural estates in East Bengal, followed by the same nature of work in the villages surrounding his Santiniketan school. The rural reconstruction work around Santiniketan was started in a village called Surul under the guidance of the English agricultural scientist and idealist Leonard Elmhirst whom Rabindranath invited to Visva-Bharati in 1921. This became the Sriniketan experiment of rural reconstruction. The letters that follow help to understand Rabindranath's ideals for this work.

To Leonard Elmhirst, [? place], 19 December 1937*.

Dear Leonard,

You know how for a long time I have been cherishing my hope of establishing an ideal centre of education at Sriniketan—an ideal which is not curtailed to the strictest measure of a narrow village environment, which is not specially set apart to be doled out as famine ration carefully calculated to be just good enough for emaciated life and dwarfed mentality. It is well known that the education which is prevalent in our country is extremely meagre in the spread of its area and barren in quality. Unfortunately this is all that is available for us and that has set up an artificial standard proudly considered as respectable. Outside the bhadralogue class, pathetic in their struggle for fixing a university label on their name, there is a vast obscure multitude who cannot even dream of such a costly ambition. With them we have our best opportunity if we know how to use it, and there only we can have our freedom for offering to our country the best all-round culture not mutilated by the official dictators. I have generally noticed that when the charitably minded city-bred politicians talk of education for the village folk they mean a little left over in the bottom of their cup after diluting it copiously. They are callously unmindful of the fact that the kind and the amount of food that is needful for the mental nourishment must not be apportioned differently according to the social status of those that receive it.

I am therefore all the more keen that the Siksha-Satra should justify the ideal I have entrusted to it and should represent the most important function of Sriniketan in helping students for the attainment of manhood complete in all its

various aspects. Our people need more than anything else a real scientific training that could inspire in them the courage of experiment and initiative of mind which we lack as a nation. Sriniketan should be able to provide for its pupils an atmosphere of rational thinking and behaviour which alone can save them from stupid bigotry and moral cowardliness. I myself attach much more significance to the educational possibilities of Siksha-Satra than to the school and college of Santiniketan, which are everyday becoming more and more like so many schools and colleges elsewhere in this country, borrowed cages that treat the student's minds as captive birds whose sole human value is judged according to the mechanical repetition of lessons prescribed by an education dispensation foreign to the soil.

It would indeed give me great joy if Sriniketan could at least make use of its opportunities to realise my dream and I would welcome Dhiren [Sen] with his vigorous masterfulness to rouse up Siksha-Satra to a new course of fruitful adventure. In that case not only he will have my blessings but also as much guidance as is possible for me to offer him with the last flicker of my life.

With my affectionate regards,

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

* This letter is of a later date than the two that follow. As it contains a more elaborate statement about Rabindranath's ideals of his village work, I have put this letter before the two with earlier dates.

To Leonard Elmhirst, Santiniketan, 18 April 1923.

Dear Deshika Elmhirst,

You are away quite a long time, but we have not yet grown reconciled to your absence. You are not a mere part of our organisation, but because you represent the life of the place we miss some vital source of joy and strength when we miss you. However, we know that the series of experiences you are going through in your travels will bring to us a new current of rich life when you return to us, will impart a fresh vigour of confidence to the experiments we are carrying on. The work which you have started in Surul is a work of creation, for in it you are not following some fixed path prescribed in books, but giving expression to your own creative personality to which even the opposition of obdurate materials ultimately brings help for shaping the structure. I only hope that this creative spirit which constantly guides the process of living adjustment between the inner ideal and the ever changing circumstances you will leave behind when one day you will be compelled to leave us. But I feel almost certain that never in your life you will be able to desert your Surul permanently—for the only true world for a man

is the world of his own making, as for God is this universe. How few men have the good fortune to find for himself the freedom, the material and the opportunity to be able to secure his place as the Colleague of his Creator. Most of us have to be contented to carry the burden of a plan or a want of plan imposed upon us by outside circumstances or the plenty of our inner nature.

I have just come back from a long campaign of raising funds, thoroughly tired in body and mind. This is not my work, and I feel that I insult myself when I let my ideals go out for the purpose of courting money. Money should feel humble and seek truth—and truth should have dignity and confidence in itself to be able to wait and even to face apparent failure. For the first time in my life I feel that I am growing old. An institution like Visva-Bharati has on its one side its ideal and on the obverse side its aspect of worldliness. This latter is for the prudent and aged and when a poet is brought under its burden his youth is crushed.

I am going to Shillong to spend my vacation, and I have made arrangements for our European friends to go to Ghoom near Darjeeling and have a taste of the cold climate there till the rainy season. Arthur [Geddes] is delightful, he is doing very well in Surul. Miss Green needs a change very badly and I am glad that she has consented to accompany our Professors to the hills for the ostensible reason of looking after them. I believe she would not have moved from Surul if I had not appealed to her own necessity.

With love, ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore

To Leonard Elmhirst, Shanghai, 16 June 1924.

Dear Leonard,

Directly after you left the steamer there came two copies of the typescripts of "City and Village". If you possibly can try to send me my talk about education given at Mrs Bena's house.

I am glad to say that there is no sign of Kadoori or Shastri. Our Indian friends came and took away Kshiti Babu [Kshitimohan Sen] and company to their house. They wrestled with me for some time and then gave up. I am the sole monarch in that cabin of mine with my Manchu friend somewhere beyond my reach.

I hope you do not need to be told how much I feel about the service you have done me on this trip. Also you must know that it is not merely a feeling of gratitude that you have won from me, it is something deeper. I carry an infinite space of loneliness around my soul through which the voice of my personal life very often does not reach my friends—for which I suffer more than they do. I have my yearning for the personal world as much as any other mortal, or perhaps more. But my destiny seems to be careful that in my life's experience I should only

have the *touch* of personality and not the *ties* of it. All the while she claims my thoughts, my dreams and my voice, and, for that, detachment of life and mind is needed. In fact, I have constantly been deprived of opportunities for intimate attachments of companionship to last long. Then again I have such an extreme delicacy of sensitiveness with regard to personal relationships that even when I acknowledge and welcome it I cannot invite it to the immediate closeness of my life. This deficiency I acknowledge with resignation knowing that it is a sacrifice claimed of me by my Providence for some purpose which he knows.

I believe you have realised this time what I mean by my Visva-Bharati ideals. There are numerous institutions in this world for all kinds of objects—but they are for practical people possessing expert knowledge and trained skill. I have neither the ambition nor talent for such organisation. But I believe I have the power of vision which seeks its realisation in some concrete form. Unless our different works in Visva-Bharati are luminous with the fire of vision I myself can have no place in them. This is why all the time when Sriniketan has been struggling to grow into a form I was intently wishing that it should not only have a shape, but also light; so that it might transcend its immediate limits of time, space and some special purpose. If Visva-Bharati comes to attain truth through the life of those who serve her then she will illumine the path of pilgrimage and not merely fill the storeroom of benefits. I hope I may say it with truth that herein lies the difference between America and ourselves. A lighted lamp is for the end of us and not a lump of gold. I could have taken the path of politics or social service and be idolised by my people, but I naturally avoided it and incurred bitter displeasure of my countrymen. In the same way we must avoid trying to do a particular kind of good according to some recipe made by clever and learned men who have only a technical knowledge and a specialised experience. Let us bring all our power of imagination and create a world. Nandalal [Bose] is there ready for his task, you must also come and join us and let all your dreams shine across the boundaries of practical achievements.

Ever yours,

Rabindranath Tagore.

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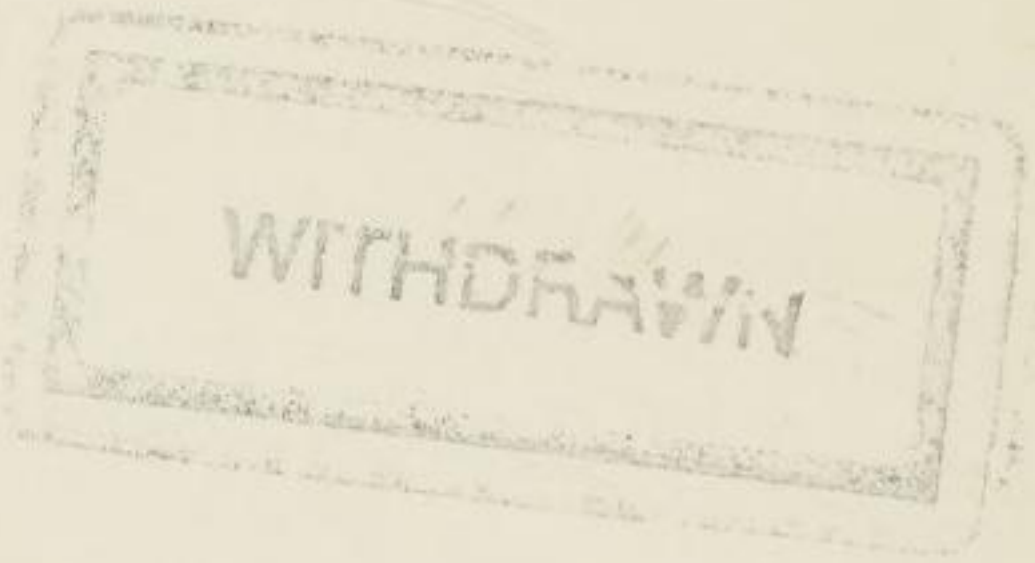

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Cover photograph: Tagore with tenant farmers at his family's agricultural estates in Eastern Bengal. The photograph is from Visva-Bharati's Rabindra-Bhavana archives.

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